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**APPROACHING RAGNAROK:  
USE OF NORSE MYTHOLOGY IN LATE TWENTIETH  
CENTURY SCANDINAVIAN LITERATURE**

**FIONA TWYCROSS**

**PhD**

**THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH**

**1997**





## **DECLARATION**

I, Fiona Twycross, declare that this thesis is my own work.

Fiona Twycross  
Edinburgh, April 1998

# APPROACHING RAGNAROK: USE OF NORSE MYTHOLOGY IN LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY SCANDINAVIAN LITERATURE

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## PREFACE - ON MYTHOLOGICAL NAMES

The Norse mythological characters and terms have a number of variants, even within a particular country. To avoid confusion, where the name of a character in a book is spelt differently to a normal English variant, a standard English equivalent will be given in square brackets after the first occurrence of the name. In the index, where the intention is to facilitate comparison, the characters are listed according to a standard English equivalent, with the version used by the author concerned in square brackets.

### *Note:*

The article which makes up the appendix was first published in *Northern Studies* 1996 (31), and I would like to thank the editor for granting permission for the article to be included in this thesis.



## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

The core premise in this thesis is that each generation rediscovers and reinterprets mythology from its own perspective; and that individual authors within each generation make intertextual use of mythology accordingly. With this premise in mind I will examine the intertextual use, interpretation, and revision of Norse mythology, particularly the material from Snorri's *Edda* and the *Poetic Edda*, in Scandinavian literature of the 1980's and early 1990's.

Through an analysis of the use of mythology by individual authors, I aim to examine the appeal of myth generally, both to authors and readers, and will discuss how the presence of mythological material in literature can reinforce the underlying ideology in the work as a whole, and may also influence the reader's receptiveness to the work. Alongside this, the works will be analysed individually in their social and literary context.

The thesis will be divided into three sections. The first section will introduce the earliest literary accounts of Norse mythology, and the cosmology they depict. The re-use of mythology in literature generally will be discussed, and the tradition of literary re-use of Norse myth will be presented.

The second section will form the main body of the thesis. The first chapter will provide a brief survey of the works to be covered. These are taken from across Scandinavia - primarily from Denmark and Norway. In all the works, which range from post-modern poetry to picture books for children, the use of Norse mythology is a central element.

The works will then be analysed in individual chapters. The first four of these (2 - 5) examine the use of myth in novels: *Ragnarok* [The Downfall of the Gods] (1982) by Danish author Villy Sørensen; *Kärleksguden Frö* [The Love God Freyr] (1988) by Swedish writer Torgny Lindgren; *Gunnlaðar saga* [The Story about Gunnlod] (1987) by Icelandic writer Svava Jakobsdóttir; and Norwegian Vera Henriksen's *Ravn og Due* [Raven and Dove] (1991). These will be analysed in turn showing how they utilise similar material with a variety of results. The focus will then be shifted in the next two chapters (6 - 7) towards poetic re-use of myth and two Norwegian poetry cycles - *Misteltein* [Mistletoe] (1988) by Tor Obrestad and *HUN* [She] (1989) by Erling Kittelsen - will be examined. The final chapter in this second section (8) will look at the variety of ways in which children and young people are presented with mythology, and the effect the concern for "appropriate" versions of mythology may have on the ideological subtext of these works.

In the third section the comparison between the works studies will be summarised, and an assessment made of the extent to which there are similarities in the approach taken by the authors to the mythological material. Particular emphasis will be placed on whether overriding themes emerge across the works, and whether the use of Norse myth embodied in these themes can be seen to correlate with late twentieth century socio-cultural preoccupations in Scandinavia.

## SECTION ONE

### MYTH AND INTERTEXTUALITY

*Hear my words, you holy gods,  
great men and humble sons of Heimdall;  
by Odin's will, I'll speak the ancient lore,  
the oldest of all that I remember*

*Völuspá: 1*

## MYTH AND INTERTEXTUALITY

The retelling, and reinterpretation, of Norse myth<sup>1</sup> takes place within all levels of Scandinavian society - from academic literature to advertising and promotion of the oil industry. The limitless range of possibilities for interpretation of myth generally is highlighted by Canadian scholar Northrop Frye who, defining myth from a literary perspective, writes:

What a myth 'means' has various answers (...) but what it means to a literary critic includes everything it has been made to mean in later literature.

(Frye, 1982: 34-35)

Frye's definition of myth as "everything it has been made to mean in later literature" underlines the problem at the heart of an examination of intertextual use of mythology. That is that the interpretation of myth in any given text or context is subject to any number of factors, and it will be demonstrated below how in different eras - and subject to the interpretation of different writers - Norse myth can be employed to produce diametrically opposed "meanings".

Frye's definition, however, also highlights the essential broadness of the term 'myth' itself; a broadness encompassed by theologian Don Cupitt in the following definition of myth:

we may say that a myth is typically a traditional sacred story of anonymous authorship and archetypal or universal significance which is recounted in a certain community and is often linked with a ritual; that it tells of the deeds of superhuman beings such as gods; demigods, heroes, spirits or ghosts; that it is set outside historical time in primal or eschatological time or in the supernatural world, or may deal with comings and goings between the

---

<sup>1</sup> A broad outline of the sources of Norse mythology will be presented below (pages 12 - 27).

supernatural world and the world of human history; that the superhuman beings are imagined in anthropomorphic ways, although their powers are more than human and often the story is not naturalistic but has the fractured, disorderly logic of dreams; that the whole body of a people's mythology is often prolix, extravagant and full of seeming inconsistencies; and finally that the work of myth is to explain, to reconcile, to guide action or to legitimate. (Cupitt, 1982: 29)

Within literature we will see how the legitimating quality of myth can be used both to support cultural preconceptions, and also how - when inverted, or revised - myth can be used in order to lend added weight to social critique.

Among the numerous reasons for the re-use and reinterpretation of myths is, however, their value as good stories which primarily entertain the reader and stimulate the imagination, and it is important not to neglect this factor in a study of this kind. Norwegian writer Tor Åge Bringsværd, who himself draws heavily on myth in his work, has described myth as "en slags trampoline for fantasien" [a kind of trampoline for the imagination] (Bringsværd, 1991: 71). This metaphor encompasses the almost physical enjoyment readers can receive from reading myths, and the image the movement of trampolining conjurs up also reflects the inherent flexibility of myths mentioned above.

The use of myths confers a deeper/higher level of textual meaning, as ideas are bounced between the reader, the text and the mythology, creating a dialogue within and between the levels of text and the reader.

In his work *Folkeeventyrets moderne genbrug eller hvad forfatteren gør* (1987) [The modern re-use of the folk-tale, or what the author does] the Danish literary scholar

and critic Torben Brostrøm describes the interaction between text and intertext<sup>2</sup>:

Litteraturen bearbejder myten tematisk og sprogligtsensuelt. Både romantikken og modernismen har arbejdet intenst med mytisk materiale, den sidste især i den hensigt, at myten ikke stivner i mytologi.

(Brostrøm, 1987: 19)

[Literature re-works myth thematically and linguistically-sensually. Both Romanticism and Modernism have worked intensively with mythical material, the latter especially with the aim that myth does not harden in mythology.]

Brostrøm emphasizes the essential manipulation of the source material involved, as well as the intrinsic openness of myth. The production of 'meaning' can be seen to be prompted by the author's use of mythology which acts on the cultural knowledge, perceptions, and preoccupations of the reader.

The intertextual process to which Brostrøm alludes can be defined succinctly as:

the production of meaning from the interrelationships between audience, text, other texts, and the socio-cultural determinations of significance.

(Stephens, 1992: 84)

Thus intertextuality can be seen to extend beyond the dialogue the author sets up between his/her text and an intertext, and beyond the significance the author places on the relationship between the two. This definition also embraces the audience (who may or may not be familiar with the earlier text, and who may like or dislike it), as well as socio-cultural factors which affect the reader's perception of either/any of the texts involved in the intertextual equation.

In the context of this thesis, which will examine contemporary Scandinavian texts in which the use of Eddic texts forms an integral element, we will see that intertextuality

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<sup>2</sup> Here "intertext" is taken to mean an earlier text upon which an author is drawing.

involving these texts draws not only on the words and stories contained within the earliest representations of Norse myth, but also upon the cultural significance ascribed to the texts from which our principal knowledge of Norse myth is gained.

The relationship between the different elements involved in the construction of meaning in an intertextual context changes over time, as our interpretation of myths - and the body of mythology from which they emanate - shifts, allowing them to retain relevance. Tor Åge Bringsværd describes how myths maintain their cultural position:

Myter (...) blir aldri uaktuelle. For de handler ikke bare om "den gang" og "den tid". De kan like gjerne fortelle om "hver gang" og "all tid". Men hver generasjon må likevel erobre dem på nytt. Fortelle dem om igjen. På sin måte. Holde dem opp mot lyset fra sin egen hverdag. (Bringsværd, 1991: 77)

[Myths (...) never become outdated. They are not just about "that time" and "that age". They are just as much about "every time" and "every age". But every generation has to conquer them anew. Tell them over again. In its way. Hold them up in the light of its own day.]

If one examines the reception of Norse myth in literature over the past thousand years, one can perceive "generational" approaches to myth/mythology that correlate to socio-cultural trends within Scandinavian society. Central to the discussion of the core texts in subsequent sections will be the extent to which this process can be seen to be present within contemporary literature, with the use of Norse myth linked to present day preoccupations.

The process of change, whereby different generations *use* myth in different ways, extends to the approach taken to defining what myth *is*. This changes according to current philosophy. Thus early recorders of Norse myth, such as Snorri Sturlusson

and Saxo Grammaticus adopted a euhemeristic<sup>3</sup> approach which served to allow pagan beliefs to be recorded and studied in an age in which a repressive Christian church had considerable political power, and their intertextual interpretations of Norse myth will be discussed below.

In later centuries, with the Church's political authority waning, academic interest in pagan mythology was no longer viewed as dangerously akin to an interest in devil worship. Theories of mythology have subsequently developed along similar lines to intellectual theories generally, for instance in parallel to psychology and anthropology - new fields of study in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.

The flexibility of myth, in this case Norse myth, is increased by the acceptance of myth as an imaginative rather than a religious story. This can be seen to affect our interpretation and:

it is only when a myth is accepted as an imaginative story that it is really believed in. As a story, a myth becomes a *model* of human experience, and its relation to that experience becomes a confronting and present experience. The truth of the story of the fall of Adam and Eve does not depend on the possibility that an archaeologist may eventually dig up their skeletons. It depends on its power to convey the present sense of alienation in human consciousness, the sense of being surrounded by a nature not ours.  
(Frye, 1980: 29)

Removing the demand for *historical* truth from a myth, allows us to attribute universality to myth. Far from weakening our perception of the "truth" of myths, this serves to extend and strengthen it.

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<sup>3</sup> Euhemerism - the theory that claims pagan gods to be deified humans - named after Euhemerus, a Sicilian from the fourth century BC who wrote of Zeus as a mortal Cretan who was subsequently deified.



The hallowed terms which Frye employs to describe myth reflect the cultural significance bestowed on myth - not only are they stories of gods and heroes of the ancient (often more glorious) past, but they can also be seen to represent a deeper "truth" and the foundation stone on which a culture is based.

The reverence in which we hold myth is due in part to an underlying belief that life was somehow better in the past<sup>4</sup>. Mircea Eliade describes how:

by reciting the myths one reconstitutes that fabulous time and hence in some sort becomes "contemporary" with the events described ... As a summary formula we might say that by "living" the myths one emerges from profane, chronological time and enters a time that is of a different quality, a sacred Time at once primordial and indefinitely recoverable.

(Eliade, 1963: 18)

Generally the idea that myths represent a model and contain a higher universal truth goes unchallenged. The fact that these *models* are also culturally determined can go undetected until their underlying ideological bias is highlighted, for example through a feminist reading of a myth such as Svava Jakobsdóttir's *Gunnlaðar saga* (see Section II, Chapter 4).

In *Mythologies*, the now classic collection of essays on the presence of myth in the modern world, Roland Barthes describes how:

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<sup>4</sup> Compare Stephens 1992, on how the legendary/medieval past is portrayed in children's literature; Section II, Chapter 7.

myth has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal.

(Barthes, 1993:142)

This he describes as supporting bourgeois ideology, and the unmasking of an alliance between myth and the establishment reveals mythology's implicit support for the status quo: on occasion affirming the almost divine right of the ruling classes to be in their elevated position. In Sweden, for instance, the legendary dynasty of the Ynglings traced their ancestry back to the god Freyr (aka Yngvi-Frey), thus demonstrating their divine right to the throne (Ellis Davidson, 1964). Because of the long tradition of its use in support of the establishment, mythology plays what is essentially a socially affirming role (Purkiss, 1992), and the politicization this implies goes back at least as far as the time the stories were written down by Snorri Sturlusson and Saxo Grammaticus in the thirteenth century. Myths are shaped by the society in which they are developed, and also shape and maintain a nation's consciousness.

The status attributed to mythology generally lends prestige to literature borrowing from it, giving it extra significance or depth - a "universal", or "eternal", quality. Myth's presence in literature, therefore, gives an added credibility to the underlying themes and ideas in the author's work.

## **MYTHICAL INEQUALITY**

Just as mythology can be seen to belong to "high culture" and literature using it acquires an elevated status, so different mythologies can be seen to have differing statuses. Historically Classical mythology like Classical thought generally, has been granted a cultural prestige that has gone unquestioned for centuries in Western Europe, since Roman supremacy and the wholesale introduction of Christianity in

Europe shifted the central cultural focus to the South. Use of Classical mythology in literature became a code, and indigenous mythologies, like Norse mythology in Scandinavia, have tended to be neglected in favour of Classical which was considered more civilized. Bruno Bettelheim argues that Western culture is unusual in the way it divides folk tales into myth and fairy/folk tale (Bettelheim, 1976), and we can see how this division has been employed to maintain and exclude social classes. Dianne Purkiss describes the way in which myth has been deployed to this effect:

A myth is not a single entirety, but a diversity of stories told differently in different times and different places. Myths are often caught up in contemporaneity, just as they were for their inventors. As part of that history, myths have been part of literary and academic self-definitions. Classical myths are, in Alicia Ostriker's phrase handed *down*; they belong to high culture, and are largely transmitted by educational and cultural authorities. Consequently, classical myth is not merely authoritative and high in itself; it also confers prestige on texts which display their author's knowledge of it. Classical myth became a way for literary communities to constitute themselves and exclude others.

(Purkiss, 1992: 441)

The example of the Swedish Ynglings implies that a similar use of myth has taken place, to some extent, within Scandinavia as well. Despite this, the perception still remains that Norse myth is in some way a second class mythology. Villy Sørensen, for example, writes in the afterword to the English translation of *Ragnarok* [*Downfall of the Gods*] that

the Norse myths are not so well known or loved as the Greek mythology.

(Sørensen, 1989: 117)

Tor Åge Bringsværd, who has a clear agenda for the promotion of Norse mythology in Norway, argues (in what can be read as an incitement to writers to recognize the

### Illustration I

Norse gods in Classical guise.  
Nineteenth century book illustration showing  
Odin and Valkyries welcoming fallen hero to Valhalla.



value/potential within their national mythology) that an underlying inferiority complex is at play, and that the suppression of Norse gods in Scandinavian literature has been voluntary:

Alt utenlandsk er liksom så mye finere og flottere og dypere og mer sjelfult (...) Når norske diktere har brukt mytologiske motiver i sine vers med og uten rim, så har det nesten bestandig dreid seg om *gresk* mytologi. Helt fra latinskolenes dager har det alltid vært den som var selve mytologien - med stor og gresk M.

(Bringsværd, 1991: 75)

[Everything foreign seems so much finer and nicer and deeper and more soulful (...) When Norwegian poets have used mythological motifs in their verse, with and without rhyme, then it has nearly always been a case of Greek mythology. Right from the days of the 'latin school', it has been the real mythology - with a capital and Greek M.]

## REVISION OF MYTH

However, making the argument one of Norse versus Classical distracts attention away from the content of the body of myths as a whole, and the cultural values it represents. Increasingly a challenge is being made to the accepted versions of myths, and our interpretation of them, and this denotes a challenge to the ideological foundations of the cultures which have shaped, and in turn been shaped by, the myths concerned.

All rewriting/re-use of myth contains an element of revision. Feminist revision of mythology takes this process further - acting consciously and openly to alter the sub-text of the myth. Alice Ostriker describes how

whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible.

(Ostriker, 1986: 316)

This description of the powerful potential for change revision of myth contains can be applied to all authors (male and female) who consciously revise/reinterpret myth to "shift the terms of the myth" (Purkiss, 1992), perhaps by telling the myth from a different angle and giving a peripheral character a more central role. Alternatively, an author might change the ending and thus the implication of a myth (eg Sørensen's *Ragnarok*, see Section II, Chapter 2).

An essential element of active myth-revisionism is the refusal to think of myth as sacrosanct, something 'given', and therefore not to be tampered with. With regard to Norse mythology this is a particularly relevant approach to take, because the limited extant literary sources do not contain, or represent, a Norse proto-myth.

## DOES "NORSE MYTHOLOGY" REALLY EXIST?

There are no contemporary pagan literary accounts upon which we can base a sound understanding and interpretation of Norse religion and practices. Consequently our knowledge of Norse pagan beliefs is built up from fragmentary evidence from archaeology, the study of place names, and from the literary accounts of "outsiders". We therefore have neither a complete nor first-hand record of the religious beliefs and world view of pre-Christian Scandinavia.

The precise origins of Norse myth are obscure, but pictures from the Scandinavian Bronze Age (c 1600 - 450 BC) suggest that a belief in personal gods existed at that time from which later beliefs may have grown (Turville-Petre, 1964). Very little is known about the period between the end of the Bronze Age and the beginning of the Migration Period (c 200 - 600 AD), and there are few signs to explain how the cult of Odin, or Wodan, came to be flourishing in the North of Europe by the Third Century AD. Archaeological investigation of burial sites can reveal practices associated with particular gods (Ellis Davidson, 1964), and the study of place names is also useful in building up a picture of the geographical distribution of the prominence of a particular god in a particular area. The Danish town-name "Odense", for example, indicates that the area was at one time dedicated to Odin (Bæksted, 1984). These sources are unfortunately limited, and it is therefore from the literary accounts of the Norse religion that most of our understanding of pagan belief and practices comes.

These literary sources of Norse mythology are without exception the accounts and interpretations of outsiders. Contemporaneous accounts, such as those of Julius Caesar in *The Conquest of Gaul* (c 52 BC) and Roman historian Tacitus in his *Germania* (c 98 AD), show clear bias against the Germanic peoples (Caesar, 1982;

Tacitus, 1970), and the account of the later historian, Adam of Bremen, whose *History of the Bishops of Hamburg* (c 1070) contains a graphic description of the festivals and sacrifices at the temple at Uppsala in Sweden, is clearly coloured by Christian disapproval (Ellis Davidson, 1964).

Paganism survived far longer in Scandinavia than in other Germanic areas with similar beliefs and practices. The conversion to Christianity in Britain was largely complete by the late sixth century, in Denmark conversion came by the late tenth century, with Norway converted soon afterwards. In Iceland, Christianity was adopted for largely pragmatic reasons in the year 1000, while in Sweden paganism was still evident in the twelfth century (Foote and Wilson, 1970).

The Scandinavian literary sources, particularly those from Iceland, are more extensive than those of non-Scandinavian observers. Generally the two works discussed below - the *Poetic Edda* and Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*, an Icelandic 'poetics' - have been used to build up a picture of the belief systems of the Norse pagans. However, in terms of religious beliefs, these are also the work of outsiders, as a true literary tradition was only introduced with the arrival of Christianity and the Roman alphabet, and all extant Old Icelandic literature has been written down post-conversion. The runic alphabet *futhor*, used by the pagan Vikings appears to have been used principally for the purpose of inscriptions, with laws, stories and poetry being passed down orally, although there is evidence that the Danes and Swedes used the runic alphabet for writing on vellum (Gordon, 1981).

Most subsequent re-use or discussion of Norse myth centres on the knowledge we



can glean from the Eddic texts and a study of the later texts is incomplete without an overview of the *Eddas*<sup>5</sup>.

### **THE POETIC EDDA**

The collection of Old Norse poems known as the *Poetic Edda*, or *Elder Edda*, was rediscovered by an Icelandic bishop, Brynólfur Sveinsson, in 1643<sup>6</sup>. Although the poems about gods and heroes were unknown at the time, he recognised some of the stories from Snorri's *Prose Edda* (see below pages 18-25), and realised he had found some of the sources from which Snorri had worked in the writing of his poetics. The manuscript, often referred to as 'Codex Regius', is our main source of Eddic poetry.

Eddic poetry is distinguished from skaldic - or court - poetry, although both are generally assumed to have been composed by skalds (court poets). Both subject matter and form differ. Eddic poetry is anonymous and relates Norse myth and Germanic legends. Skaldic poetry, which alludes to mythology in its elaborate use of language, commonly has a different metric form to Eddic poetry and the (named) poet usually chooses a topical theme, often dedicated to a ruler or benefactor (Hallberg, 1962).

There has been considerable debate concerning the age and origin of the Eddic poems, but it is likely that they were composed in the period 800-1300 AD (Hallberg, 1962).

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<sup>5</sup> Where an individual myth or poem has particular relevance to the examination of a core text, this will be presented alongside the textual analysis in Section II.

<sup>6</sup> The Bishop gave the manuscript to the Danish king of the time - Fredrik III. The high cultural value placed on the ancient manuscripts by modern-day Scandinavians is evidenced by the considerable furore surrounding the eventual return of the manuscript to Iceland in 1971.

Despite the fact that oral transmission of poetry is arguably less likely to lead to significant changes in content, the poems cannot be assumed to have been recorded entirely as they were first composed. Academic John Lindow writes in his survey of the study of Norse mythology, 'Mythology and Mythography', that it could be argued that

sacred texts are more likely to remain fixed than other sorts of texts. On the other hand, if we have learned any lesson from the study of oral cultures, it is that their cultural artefacts tend to be adapted to change, whether or not such adaptation is admitted. A text can remain sacred even if its content undergoes change. In the case of possibly sacred Eddic poetry, however, we must add the far greater problem of the nature and the extent of the change which the culture underwent, particularly with respect to its sacred aspects. If we are to accept that Eddic poetry is pagan myth, we must accept that two and a half centuries of Christianity wrought no changes in Eddic texts. This is of course possible, but it cannot be demonstrated. (Lindow, 1985: 30)

The uncertainty surrounding the "heathenness" of Eddic poetry can best be illustrated by *Völuspá* [The Sibyl's Prophecy], generally held to be the most significant Eddic poem, both in its dramatic verse and mythical content, and to which Snorri Sturluson refers extensively in his *Edda*, and allusion to which is greater in later intertextual use of Norse myth than to any other Norse poem.

The apocalyptic and prophetic pronouncements give *Völuspá* a particular continued relevance, and the poem is ostensibly a prophecy spoken by a sibyl before the beginning of the world. The poem has a cryptic air, and this heightens the mystical, prophetic quality.





voices, and this approach may have influenced Snorri's style in the *Prose Edda* (Kristjánsson, 1992).

### SNORRI'S EDDA

The Icelandic chieftain and scholar Snorri Sturluson (1179 - 1241 AD) drew heavily on the Eddic tradition of poetry when he was writing his *Prose Edda*, otherwise known as *Snorri's Edda* or *The Younger Edda*, in the thirteenth century, over two hundred years after the conversion of Iceland.

In later reconstructions of Norse cosmology Snorri's *Edda* has been given priority, and has in many ways become the "accepted version". Lindow comments that

implicit in the view of much current Norse research is that Snorri is to be accepted unless the reverse can be demonstrated.

(Lindow, 1985: 23)

This is in part due to the occasional obscurity of the Eddic verses. However, as Svava Jakobsdóttir illustrates in her novel *Gunnlaðar saga* [The Story about Gunnlod] (1987) the two sources do not always agree<sup>8</sup>.

Snorri's *Edda*, written in his native Icelandic, contains many marvellous and often witty stories and descriptions of the gods, in which he quotes heavily from earlier sources - Eddic and skaldic verse. The work has been preserved in four complete, or almost complete, manuscripts and a number of fragments, and gives invaluable insight

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<sup>8</sup> A comparison of the two stories will be made in the presentation of Svava Jakobsdóttir's novel *Gunnlaðar saga*, in Section II, Chapter Four.

into thirteenth century knowledge and beliefs about the pagans, although as with all Old Icelandic literature - the original has been lost (Hallberg, 1962).

Snorri's dominant position in the study of Norse myth owes much to the sheer volume of mythological material his work contains. However, his construction of a ready-interpreted cosmology is also a central factor.

The *Prose Edda* is written in four parts; *The Prologue*, *Gylfaginning* [Deluding of Gylfi], *Skaldskaparmál* [Poetic Diction], and *Hattatal* [List of Meters]. Although now read mainly for its mythological content, the principal and stated aim of his work was to preserve a knowledge of the language and conventions of skaldic poetry. The short prologue, with which Snorri opens, but which appears to have been written last, deflects possible criticism of his project from the Church and gives a euhemeristic account of how most of mankind forgot their true god and worshipped Nature. The Norse gods - the Aesir - he describes as having been Trojan kings and chieftains who migrated to Scandinavia founding dynasties that were considered so great that "great glory was spoken of them, so that they seemed more like gods than men". (Snorri, 1987: 4)

Following on from the prologue, *Gylfaginning* - which is structured in a question and answer form - presents what has largely become the accepted view of Norse mythology. As mentioned above, the form Snorri adopts contains echoes from the Eddic poems *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál*, although it could equally be a reflection of the style of medieval school books generally (Kristjánsson, 1992). Despite the structural similarities to *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál*, it is evident that Snorri's main source for *Gylfaginning* is *Völuspá*.

*Gylfaginning* describes how the Aesir cheat a Swedish king, Gylfi, out of some land and trick him into believing that they are gods. Gylfi - disguised and travelling under the assumed name of Gangleri (He-Who-is-Tired-of-Wandering) - sets the Aesir a series of questions, and receives answers from the three Aesir: Hár (High), Jafnhár (Just as High), and Þridi (Third) about various aspects of the world. "Gangleri's" first question is fairly straight forward:

'Who is the highest and most ancient of gods?'

(Snorri, 1987: 8)

High's answer, which contains a large number of names all of which describe Odin, illustrates the intended purpose of the work as a whole - to preserve the poetic language:

High said: 'He is called All-father in our language, but in Old Asgard he had twelve names. One is All-father, the second Herran or Herian, the third Nikar or Hnikar, the fourth Nikuz or Hnikud, the fifth Fiolnir, the sixth Oski, the seventh Omi, the eight Bifklidi or Biflindi, the ninth Svidar, the tenth Svidrir, the eleventh Vidrir, the twelfth Ialg or Ialk.'

(Snorri, 1987: 8-9)

The dialogue continues back and forth in this manner, and Snorri builds up a cohesive picture of the Norse world view from the creation and beyond the time of Ragnarok.

In *Gylfaginning* twelve gods are mentioned as well as Odin, and descriptions of various gods and their characteristics appear alongside a number of the most famous stories concerning them. For instance, the figure of Thor is described with his goat-drawn chariot and his inclination for killing giants with his mighty hammer Mjollnir. One of the most famous stories associated with Thor is recorded in *Gylfaginning* -

that of his visit to the giant Utgard-Loki, with Loki, the 'trickster' - as is the tale of his fishing trip on which he encounters the Midgard serpent.

Other gods mentioned in *Gylfaginning* include the Aesir god Tyr, the god to pray to for success in battle; the wise god Bragi, god of poetry, and his wife, Idun. Snorri also describes Heimdall, the watchman of the gods who stands guard by the rainbow bridge - Bifrost - that links Asgard to the human world, Midgard.

The Norse gods consist of two distinct families, and the second family of gods, the Vanir, is also introduced in *Gylfaginning*. Snorri provides descriptions of Njord, apparently the oldest Vanir, ruler of wind and moderator of sea and fire, his wife the giantess Skadi, and his children the god Freyr and the goddess Freyja, who are associated with fertility.

Loki, mentioned above in connection with his travels with Thor, is portrayed by Snorri as having a central role in the downfall of the gods. Originally a giant, Loki is described as Odin's blood brother, and lives alongside the gods. As well as being father to three of the more grotesque creatures we meet in the myths - the wolf Fenrir, the Midgard Serpent, and the goddess Hel - Loki's changeability is portrayed as extending to his sexuality, and he gives birth to Odin's horse Sleipnir.

Snorri points the blame for Ragnarok at Loki, and towards the end of *Gylfaginning* comes the story of Loki's treachery that leads to the death of the good Aesir god Balder at the hands of his blind brother Hoder.

The Norse gods are mortal and doomed: their downfall will follow a winter lasting



three years. During this so-called "fimbul"-winter society will collapse, and Snorri paraphrases *Völuspá* to describe how:

Brothers will fight and kill each other, cousins will break the bonds of their relationship. It will be harsh for heroes, much depravity, age of axes, age of swords, shields cloven, age of winds, age of wolves, until the world is ruined.  
(Snorri, 1987: 53)

Snorri's description of Ragnarok is dramatic - the world engulfed in flames, and the race of man perishing alongside the gods, and the earth which will be engulfed by the sea. Far from implying the end of the world, however, Snorri's Ragnarok seems to have been envisaged as both an inevitable and a recurrent event, followed just as inevitably by renewal (Stanley Martin, 1972).

The final descriptions given to Gangleri by his Aesir hosts portray the renewal of the world that will take place after Ragnarok, clearly based on the passages in *Völuspá*, and Snorri ends this section re-emphasising the humanity of the Aesir.

*Skaldskaparmál* the third section of the *Prose Edda* is initially also constructed in a dialogue form. The opening scene is a banquet at which Bragi - the god of poetry - entertains Aegir, a skilled musician with whom he discusses the origin of poetry and poetic language. The two characters are soon forgotten as Snorri relates a number of other well-known mythological stories not given in *Gylfaginning*, notably that of Odin's acquisition of the mead of poetic inspiration from the giant Suttung's daughter (described more fully below, Section II, Chapter 3). Most of the stories concern the giants' attempts to outdo the gods and steal their treasures (Ellis Davidson, 1964), and

we can see how the impression of the giants as the evil enemies of the gods stems, at least in part, from these stories.

In the course of *Skaldskaparmál* a total of over sixty named poets are quoted, and a large number of 'kennings'(conventional metaphoric names) and 'heiti' (poetic names), typical of skaldic and Eddic poetry, are presented. For instance Snorri writes that Thor shall be referred to:

by calling him son of Odin and Lord, father of Magni and Modi and Thrud, husband of Sif, stepfather of Ull, ruler and owner of Miollnir and the girdle of might, of Bilskirnir, defender of Asgard, Midgard, enemy and slayer of giants and troll-wives, killer of Hruginir, Geirrod, Thrivaldi, lord of Thialfi and Roskva, enemy of the Midgard serpent, foster-son of Vingnir and Hlora. The poet Bragi said this:

Vridrir's [Odin's] heir's [Thor's] line lay by no means slack on  
Eynæfir's ski [boat] when Iormungand uncoiled on the sand.  
(Snorri, 1987: 72)

The final section of the *Prose Edda*, *Hattatal* [List of Meters] lists over 100 different meters in its 102 stanzas. The poem is accompanied by a concurrent explanation of its complicated structure, and was written by Snorri in praise of King Hakon Hakonarson (ruler of Norway 1217 - 1263) and his father-in-law, Earl Skuli (d 1240), both of whom Snorri met while in Norway.

Despite his obvious enthusiasm for both the poetic conventions and the stories he records, Snorri emphasises that the work as a whole is written with a pedagogical intention, and he detaches himself from the beliefs presented in his work:

these things have now to be told to young poets who desire to learn the language of poetry and to furnish themselves with a wide vocabulary

using traditional terms; or else they desire to be able to understand what is expressed obscurely. Then let such a one take this book as scholarly inquiry and entertainment. But these stories are not to be consigned to oblivion or demonstrated to be false, so as to deprive poetry of ancient kennings which major poets have been happy to use. Yet Christian people must not believe in heathen gods, not in the truth of this account in any other way than that in which it is presented at the beginning of this book.

(Snorri, 1987: 65)

The detachment from pagan belief in Snorri's *Edda* presents problems from the outset for the study of Norse mythology from the point of view of the history of religion.

Lindow comments that

the study of [Snorri's *Edda* and *The Poetic Edda*] is primarily a philological and literary matter. To use them purely for explication of religious history is little more than an exercise in reconstruction.

(Lindow, 1985: 22-23)

When evaluating Snorri's work as a record of the pagan beliefs and cosmology, it is important to remember that Snorri was a Christian and wrote the *Prose Edda* two hundred years after Iceland's conversion to Christianity. The uniformity in *Gylfaginning*, for example, seems to owe a great deal to Christianity - archaeology suggests that the Norse religion appears to have been diverse, with practices and beliefs varying considerably between tribes and throughout the thousand years during which the Norse gods were worshipped (Ellis Davidson, 1964: 14). and Snorri's familiarity with the idea of an almighty god leads him to possibly over-emphasise Odin's role as head god. Additionally, the three characters facing Gangleri's questions could be seen to represent the Christian concept of the Trinity. It is also clear that Snorri in his historical works, notably *Heimskringla* - the history of the kings of

Norway, has a tendency to alter material to fit his narrative. In his book, *Eddas and Sagas*, Icelandic academic Jónas Kristjánsson emphasizes this, although he stresses the modern hypocrisy of raising this particular charge against Snorri:

He is not at all reluctant to adapt his sources as he sees fit and even to write whole new chapters of his own in order - rightly or wrongly - to clarify connections and make his narrative more alive. But in the eyes of his contemporaries this was how history should be written.

(Kristjánsson, 1992: 175)

We can also see how using Snorri as our principal basis for building a picture of Norse beliefs can lead to a distorted understanding. John Carlsen, the Danish writer and broadcaster, describes in his book *Odin og harddisken* [Odin and the hard disk] how a Christian demand for a clear divide between good and evil has distorted the interpretation of Norse myth and created a god = good : giant = bad dichotomy which appears ill-founded. He writes:

Skellet mellem godt og ondt, kaos og kosmos lader sig ikke opretholde i den nordiske mytologi. (Carlsen, 1994: 24)

[The division between good and evil, chaos and cosmos doesn't stand up in Nordic mythology.]

## OTHER SOURCES - SAXO GRAMMATICUS

Alongside the *Eddas*, which are generally considered the most significant sources, Snorri's *Heimskringla* - the history of the kings of Norway - and *Gesta Danorum* - the history of the Danes - by the twelfth century Danish ecclesiastical and historian Saxo Grammaticus also contain references to the stories of the Norse gods.

Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum*, unlike the vernacular Icelandic sources, is written in Latin and was commissioned primarily to record Denmark's glorious past in

line with chronicles written in other European countries. This being Saxo's main goal, his historicity and mythological credibility are sometimes in doubt. Although finished in the early 1200's, the only manuscript from which we know Saxo's work was printed in Paris in 1514.

The book has sixteen chapters - the first nine of which deal with the legendary past, and these contain many hero legends (notably Shakespeare's source for the story of Hamlet). In common with Snorri, Saxo humanises the gods, saying of Odin:

At that time there was a man called Odin who was believed throughout Europe, though falsely, to be a god. (Saxo, 1980: 25)

Despite the transformation of pagan gods into human kings and heroes, many of the historical figures retain mystical characteristics: through the portrayal of King Frode, for example, we gain important information about the god Freyr.

It is easy to see the manner in which Saxo demythologises the pagan gods, and there would be little support for reconstructing a picture of Norse mythology based on *Gesta Danorum*. However there is no reason to regard Snorri's *Edda* as giving a "pure" or "accurate" portrayal of the heathen beliefs either, nor indeed to assume that the *Poetic Edda* truly represents pagan belief. If most books surveying Norse mythology reconstruct Norse cosmology from Snorri's own intertextual presentation, then this is because there is little other material on which to base an understanding of the beliefs of the time.

However, this by no means lessens the intrinsic cultural importance of the *Prose Edda*, or its - and the *Poetic Edda's* - scope to be repeatedly used and reused as a

vehicle for the ideas of later authors. The cultural significance bestowed upon the stories ultimately becomes of greater significance than the precise representation of long lost beliefs.

## FROM SNORRI TO SUPERMAN - THE RECEPTION OF NORSE MYTH THROUGH THE CENTURIES

The cultural significance of myth in its literary context and the earliest extant literary sources of Norse mythology have been discussed above. The remainder of this introductory section will survey the reception of Norse mythology in Scandinavia since the thirteenth century.

The study of intertextual use of Norse mythology in literature appears to have been largely confined to analysis of works by individual writers. Two works published in recent years have made a substantial input to the study of the reception of Norse myth: *Northern Antiquity - The Post-Medieval Reception of Edda and Saga*, edited by Andrew Wawn and published in 1994, and Lars Lönnroth, Swedish academic and critic, whose *Skaldemjödet i berget. Essayer om fornisländsk ordkonst och dess återanvändning i nutiden* which was published in 1996.

In his foreword to *Northern Antiquity* Wawn stresses the

clashes, controversies and contradictions which have found expression through the cultivation and promotion of Northern antiquity - the uncertain Norse challenge to Graeco-Roman educational, cultural and imaginative hegemony.

(Wawn, 1994: ix)

The work as a whole contains many examples which demonstrate how, despite the higher prestige and use of Classical literature and thought, there is a long tradition of intertextual use of Norse mythology in Scandinavian literature following in the footsteps of Snorri.

For a number of centuries it appears that echoes of Norse myth were confined to the folklore, manifesting themselves in stories of supernatural creatures whose familiars often bore a strong resemblance to the animals associated with the Norse gods. By the Renaissance however, the period in which the *Poetic Edda* was re-discovered, a trend developed which led to the publication of vernacular medieval texts, and a number of editions and translations of Snorri's *Edda* and *Heimskringla* came out in Sweden and Denmark in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, as were *Hávamál* and *Völuspá* after Bishop Brynólfur's fortunate find (Malm, 1994).

The increased interest in Old Norse texts, is reflected in one particularly notable publication: *Atlantica* by Swedish gothicist Olaus Rudbeck. Published in the second half of the seventeenth century, Rudbeck used Old Norse texts in his work particularly Snorri's *Edda* and *Heimskringla*, to support his argument that Sweden was the lost land of Atlantis and consequently the centre of the foundation of Western culture and civilization (Malm, 1994; Lönnroth and Delblanc, 1988).

Eighteenth century Old Norse study produced nothing with quite the ambition of Rudbeck's four volume work. However the century saw a continued rise of interest in Old Norse texts with the growing fascination with the sublime often expressed in Romantic poetry. Lars Lönnroth attributes considerable influence to the Old Norse texts on literature from this period, writing:

När idén om det sublima på 1700-talet fick sitt genombrot i Europa, blev Eddan och skaldekvaden plötsligt stilbildande för europeisk och efterhand även för nordisk diktning.

(Lönnroth, 1996: 94)

[When the concept of the sublime had its breakthrough in Europe in the 1700's, The *Edda* and skaldic verse suddenly become a model for European, and eventually even for Nordic writing.]



*Den Svenska Litteraturen* describes the particular appeal of the Norse myths to European Romanticism:

Till att börja med var det den krigiska vildheten, skräcken, den karga ödsligheten, som särskilt kommer till uttryck i skaldernas skildring av Ragnarök. Man älskade valkyrior, blodtörstiga vargar, kraxande korpar, [och] vitskäggiga barder som spår ofärd.

(Den Svenska Litteraturen II, 1988: 262-264)

[Firstly it was the war-like wildness, the horror, the barren desolation which is expressed particularly in the skalds' portrayal of Ragnarok. Particularly appealing were the valkyries, bloodthirsty wolves, crowing ravens, [and] white-bearded bards predicting misfortune.]

Ironically, the impulses that sparked renewed enthusiasm for the use of Norse myth in Romantic poetry came from outside Scandinavia, notably in the work of Swiss historian Paul Henri Mallet (1730 - 1807) who had lived and worked in Copenhagen. Mallet's work from 1755, *Introduction à l'histoire de Dannemarc* [Introduction to the history of Denmark], which contained extracts from Snorri's *Edda*, and his French translation of the *Poetic Edda* from 1756, were enthusiastically received. The interest in Old Norse material manifested itself in the work of eighteenth century German and English poets such as Thomas Percy (1729 - 1811) in his *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry*, and his translation of Mallet's work was published as *Northern Antiquities* in 1770 making it more accessible to a greater number of poets. Mallet's influence can also be seen on, among others, Thomas Gray (1716 - 1771) in his poem "The Descent of Odin" published in the 1760's (Lönnroth and Delblanc, 1988; Lönnroth, 1996).

Stockholm's "Götiska förbundet" [Gothic Society] which was set up in 1811 by Erik

Gustaf Geijer (1783 - 1847) followed this trend towards the use of Old Norse literature. However, the use of ancient Scandinavian mythology in Swedish literature provided an additional national dimension, for example in Per Henrik Ling's (1776 - 1839) Gothic allegory "Gylfe" (1810) which was written in ancient Norse myth style and portrays Swedish sorrow at loss of Finland. Ling's poem was subsequently published in an issue of the mythologically named *Iduna*. This periodical was founded by Geijer in 1811, and here he published a considerable amount of his own writings on mythology such as his two programmatic gothic poems: "Manhem" (1811) and "Idunas äpplen"[Idun's Apples] (1812). These show firm support of the Swedish establishment, and the latter of the two poems uses allegorical form to express:

Grundtvigs och de tyska idealisternas föreställning om den nordiska mytologin som ett dunkelt, men gudomligt språk ur folksjälén. Idunas äpplen, som skänkte asarna evigt liv, blir här en symbol för den nordiska paradisvärld som en gång funnits men numera försvunnit.

(*Den Svenska Litteraturen II*, 1988: 274 )

[Grundtvig and the German idealists' conception of the Nordic mythology as a hazy, but godly language from the soul of the people. Idun's apples, which give the Aesir eternal life, became a symbol of the Nordic paradise which once existed but had now vanished.]

This "soul of the people" drew Esias Tegnér (1782 - 1846) to the same body of material and of all his works it is *Frithiofs saga* (1824) which is still well known in Sweden, and was highly popular in Victorian Britain (Wawn, 1994). *Fritjof saga* blends classical and Norse elements, and in it the Norse hero is pictured sailing past antique temples. The romantic approach taken by Tegnér is very much in the mood of the time, and the poem is also coloured by Tegnér's liberal politics (Böök, 1991).

Of considerable influence in Sweden in the later part of the nineteenth century was the work of Viktor Rydberg (1828 - 1885) whose *Fädernas gudasaga* was published in



Illustration II. Book cover shows M E Winge's painting 'Loke och Sigyn', depicting the bound Loki and his tireless wife Sigyn shielding him from the snake's venom.

1887, and with an English translation - *Teutonic Mythology* - coming out just two years later. His work was widely read and the young Selma Lagerlöf's (1858 - 1940) enthusiasm for the myths was inspired by hearing a lecture given by him in Stockholm.

In other parts of Scandinavia, Mallet's work was also influential in a revived use of Norse myths, and the ripples from his work can be seen in the work of Trondheim Scholars Peter Fredrik Suhm (1728 - 1798) and Gerhard Schøning (1722 - 1780) in *Førsøg til Forbedringer i den gamle Danske og Norske Historie* [Attempt at an improvement in the old Danish and Norwegian History] (1757). In Denmark, Mallet's work prompted Johannes Ewald (1743 - 1781) to write a number of plays based on Nordic myths, such as *Balders Død* (1775). The incorporation of the brusque Norse gods into the literature of polite society was not an entirely smooth process however and:

Både Suhms fortællinger og Ewalds nordiske dramaer blev anklaget for smagløs vildskab og barbari. Selv om det norrøne stof efterhånden blev ufarligt ved at blive indplantet i alle genrer fra drikkevisen til det heroiske drama, så vedblev den uciviliserede fortid at skabe en uro i den æstetiske verden. (*Dansk litteratur historie V*, 316-317)

[Both Suhm's tales and Ewald's Nordic dramas were accused of being tasteless wildness and barbarity. Even though the Norse material was later became harmless by being transplanted to all genres from drinking songs to heroic dramas, the uncivilised past still caused an unease in the aesthetic world.]

In Iceland, an early example of the use of the *Eddas*, can be seen in the work of Bjarni Thorarensen (1786 - 1841) whose poem 'Frejukettir' [Freja's Cats] warns against the dangers lurking in the path of those who easily succumb to the attractions of the fairer sex (Beck, 1950).

The end of the Napoleonic wars, and the Danish loss of national territory which



followed, shifted the cultural focus in Denmark away from the present to a more glorious Viking past. As in Sweden, romantic poets in Denmark continued to turn to Old Norse literature, and Ewald's *Balders Død* can be seen to have had a direct inspiration upon Adam Gottlob Oehlenschläger (1779 - 1850) whose enthusiasm for the myths is evident in his writing on his drama 'Balder hiin Gode'[Balder the Good] (1805):

Man vil maaske sige: Hvorfor har du valgt Baldur? Hvorfor skulde han efter sin anden Død lide Døden tredie gangen, ved at opofre sin National-Karakter, som et Experiment for din Nyhedssyge? Jeg svarer: Ikke Lyst, til at skrive en græsk Tragoedie, har bragt mig til at vælge Baldur; men Baldur, som først besieledede mig, har tvunget mig til at skrive en græsk Tragoedie.

(Oehlenschläger, 1980: 34)

[People will perhaps say: Why have you chosen Balder? Why should he after his second death suffer death a third time, by sacrificing his national character, as an experiment for your desire for novelty? I reply: I have not chosen Balder from desire to write a Greek tragedy; but Balder, having conquered me, has forced me to write a Greek tragedy.]

According to cleric, writer and educationalist Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783 - 1872), who himself has had a lasting influence on the Danish approach to Norse myth in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it was the work of Adam Oehlenschläger that led to the growth of interest in the Norse mythology (Hagland, 1996), and Grundtvig's own work with mythology reflects an equally deep love-affair with the myths. It was clear from early on in his self-declared "Asa-rus" [Aesir intoxication] that he both worked towards a synthesis of the mythological material and promoted the myths of the ancient world as having both historical value and something specific to say to the modern world (Lundgreen-Nielsen, 1994). In the course of his academic life, Grundtvig had two periods during which he was particularly preoccupied with the Norse gods. The earlier period produced his major

det er den Vidskab, jeg ønskede her at give et Omrids af, saavel i sig selv, som i sin Modsætning til den romersk-italienske Livsplage og Aandsfortærelse.

(Grundtvig, 1832: 27)

[I maintain finally that when one considers the world of the spirit with Nordic eyes in the light of Christianity, one forms a perception of the universal historic development, art and knowledge which surrounds all human life, with all its power, conditions and effects, liberates, strengthens and entertains everything that is in alliance with the individual man's, the people's and the whole of humanity's temporal wellbeing. This must by necessity lead to the most complete explanation of life, which is possible on Earth. The Greco-Nordic or neo-Danish development of life and creation of spirit is that which gives the Nordic myths, wherein the germ of this was laid, universal historical importance, and especially for us an invaluable worth, and it is that knowledge which I wished to give an outline of here, as much in itself, as in its opposition to the Roman-Italian afflictions and corrosion of the spirit.]

Grundtvig's view of myths, particularly his belief that they could be used to convey a Christian message can be seen in the approach he advocated in the early stages of the Folk High School movement, behind which he was the principal force, and where instruction in the Grundtvigian version of Norse myth was obligatory.

Grundtvig was open about his method of changing the mythical content of the stories to fit his moral vision, and an account from the 1884 diary of Niels Neilsen a pupil at a Vallekilde Folk High School, gives insight into the Grundtvigian approach. Nielsen describes a sermon by the Grundtvigian principal Ernst Trier based on the tale of Tyr and the Fenrir wolf:

Nu utvecklade han [Trier] först hur Ulven var sinnebilden för djuriskheten, som var kommen den gång Balder, oskulden, lämnade asarna, och så hur de tunga kedjorna inte kan hålla djuriskheten och råheten nere hos människosläktet, men bandet som knappt syns kan lätt göra det, detta band, kärlekens *vill*, är det som håller oss samman, också här på skolan, såväl som för den enskilde och hela samhället, och dessutom att Tyr ju var den unge

bland asarna, alltså, det är ungdommen som måste offra något, och som måste använda sina krafter för att odjuret skall kunna bindas.

(Lönnroth, 1996: 147)

[Now he [Trier] went on to say firstly how the wolf was a metaphor for bestiality, which had come when Balder, the innocent, departed from the Aesir, and so how the heavy chains can not suppress bestiality and crudity down within the human race, but the leash which is scarcely visible is able to do this, this leash, Love's will, is that which binds us together, here at the school as well, as much as for the individual and society as a whole, and besides Tyr was one of the younger Aesir, that is: it is youth who must sacrifice something, and who must use their powers in order that the beast can be bound.]

Trier's sermon demonstrates how Grundtvig's interpretation of mythology manifested itself in practice: particularly the way in which the Aesir gods were used as metaphors for positive powers, which could be used in the fight against the untamed forces represented by the wolf Fenrir, and the giant world. The continued strength of his influence on interpretation of the myths in Denmark will be discussed in Section II, Chapter 2 in the presentation of *Ragnarok* by Villy Sørensen.

As we have seen above, from mention of the work by Suhm and Schøning, interest in Norse mythology was developing in Norway in the eighteenth century. Norway did not gain independence from Denmark until 1814, and the first university in Norway - 'Det kongelige Fredriks universitet' [King Fredrik's University - now University of Oslo] - was not founded until 1811. However, the existence in Copenhagen in the eighteenth century of the literary circle Det Norske Selskab<sup>9</sup> [The Norwegian Society] indicates that a distinct Norwegian literary and intellectual identity was emerging. The members of 'Det Norske Selskab' were drawn particularly to classicism: their

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<sup>9</sup> Jan Ragnar Hagland describes Det Norske Selskab as "a kind of institutionalised preface to the nineteenth-century literary tradition of the politically semi-independent Norway" (Hagland 1994: 28)

motto was "Vos exemplaria Græca" [Greece our Example]. However, literature by Norwegians in the late eighteenth century already bore the mark of interest in Norway's former historical glory particularly in Snorri's history of the Norwegian kings *Heimskringla*, and Gerhard Schøning's depictions of Norway's glorious past, mentioned above, relied heavily on this and Snorri's *Edda* (Hagland, 1994).

Snorri's work was widely available in the eighteenth century (Lundgreen-Nielsen, 1979; Hagland, 1994) and in Norway the ancient Norse texts were employed in the building of the newly recreated nation. Interest in *Heimskringla* - in history rather than poetry - is clearly linked to a preoccupation with creating a particular Norwegian identity (Hagland, 1994). The styles and themes within *Heimskringla* were especially popular with overtly political authors such as Johan Sebastian Welhavn (1807 - 1873) and Henrik Wergeland (1808 - 1845). Among Welhavn's poems inspired directly by the mythology is 'Asgardsreien' [Asgard's Ride], and this poem can be seen to have provided the motif for Per Nicolai Arbo's (1831 - 1892) dramatic picture of the same name painted in 1872 (Tveterås, Hansen and Nøklestad, 1991).

The inspiration from the *Poetic Edda* and Snorri's *Edda* in the works of the National Romantic writers was, on the whole, less than that of *Heimskringla* in Norway and Jónas Kristjánsson how this became:

a sort of patriot's Bible in Norway (...) a prime source of inspiration in the Norwegian struggle to break out of the Swedish union in the nineteenth century (...) It was thanks to Snorri more than to any other single person that the Norwegians finally regained their national sovereignty.

(Kristjánsson, 1992: 175)



Despite being overshadowed by Snorri's history, the Eddas were clearly also sources of interest and inspiration. Peter Christian Asbjørnsen (1812 - 1885), most famous now for his collaboration in the collection of folk tales with Jørgen Moe (1813 - 1882), worked for many years collecting and interpreting Norwegian folk legend, often concluding that the tales had mythical roots. Of particular interest to students of literature is his view of the legend of Per Gynt. His analysis of this legend appeared in a German periodical in 1857, and Henrik Ibsen apparently first read of Per Gynt in Asbjørnsen's *Huldreeventyr* [Fairy tales about wood nymphs](1847). In his work *Norsk nasjonalkultur* [Norwegian National Culture] (1994), which describes the roots of Norwegian national identity, historian Bjarne Hodne describes Asbjørnsen's approach:

Her forklarer han Per som guden Tor. I Midgardsormen finner Asbjørnsen opphavet til Bøygen. Også hos Asbjørnsen har sagnene sine røtter i en fjern norsk fortid. Gjennom tradisjonen kan vi få kjennskap til denne fortiden, men ikke minst gir folkeminnene en innsikt i hvordan generasjonene har opplevd de gamle mytene og formet dem om etter sitt behov opp gjennom tidene.

(Hodne 1994: 49)

[Here he explains Per as the god, Thor. I the World Serpent, Asbjørnsen finds the origin of serpentine being. For Asbjørnsen the sagas also have their roots in a distant Norwegian past. Through the tradition we can become acquainted with this past, and folklore also gives us an insight into how generations have viewed the old myths and shaped them according to their needs through time.]

Hodne also identifies Peter Andreas Munch's 1840 account of the Norse gods and heroes, *Nordens gamle gude og heltesagn* as having significance in the work of connecting Norway to the past (Hodne, 1994). In a country that was so recently liberated from centuries of rule by Denmark, the revival of the memory of national glory in the distant past was of particular importance. Towards the end of the union

of crowns with Sweden in 1904, nationalist writers such as Per Sivle (1857-1904) drew heavily on Snorri and Norse myth in their patriotic work of the 1890's (Beyer, 1983).

As regards Iceland, dominated by Denmark in the nineteenth century the literary capital was Copenhagen and the work of Oehlenschläger can be seen to have promoted the use of Old Norse material in the work of Icelandic writers generally (Einarsson, 1948). The Old Norse literature gained symbolic importance in the fight for independence from Denmark, which was only won in 1944. As in Norway it was not primarily the *Eddas* which gave most inspiration, and in Iceland it was from the Sagas that national symbolism was taken.

Commenting on the attitude of the Icelandic academic Sigurdur Nordal towards the sagas, Jesse L Byock of the University of California writes:

For Nordal these narratives were far more than folk traditions. Rather the sagas were a critical element of national self-consciousness, cultural artifacts upon which vital comparison of the relative worth of a people could be based.  
(Byock, 1994: 166-167)

The cultural pride vested in the Old Icelandic literature was also demonstrated by the heated discussions in Iceland relating to various editions of *Njáls Saga* in the 1940's which demonstrated how it was viewed in ideological and nationalistic terms (Helgason, 1994), and the battle to regain the Old Norse manuscripts, long kept in Copenhagen and viewed by both countries as national treasure, demonstrates the political symbolism of the *Eddas*.

## TWENTIETH CENTURY - FROM THE UNIVERSAL TO SAVING THE UNIVERSE

The examples given so far of the literary use of myth have predominantly been of the explicit or implicit use of myth for nationalistic purposes. However, the use of myth can also express more general symbolism, and this aspect is often present in literature, even where the overall mythological content is minimal, and it is this use of myth which is arguably most evident around the turn of the century and early twentieth century.

An example of this use of myth comes in a short story, "De fågelfrie" [The Outlaws](1894) by Selma Lagerlöf, who drew heavily on folk traditions and legend in her authorship. The setting of "De fågelfrie" is the legendary past, but the story serves equally as a fable against the approach taken in missionary work to introduce Christianity to places such as Africa in the nineteenth century of which Lagerlöf was overtly critical. The name of one of the two central characters is Tord, and this clearly links him to the character of Thor/Tor, and the pagan religion. Symbolism is also drawn from the allusion to the mythological chain Gleipnir that binds Fenrir, which in the story is used to describe the psychological chains that bind the characters to their beliefs, and to their fates.

Use of mythological allusions to express universal qualities and ideas can be seen in a large number of twentieth century works, for example, in Norwegian writer Olav Duun's (1876 - 1939) fourth novel in his *Juvikfolke* series (1918 - 1923) *I eventyre* a central character has the name "Odin". Agnar Mykle (1915 - 1994), also from Norway, uses the names of "Ask" and "Embla" - the first human beings in the Norse

creation story - for characters in his novels *Lasso rundt fru Luna* (1954) and in his controversial *Sangen om den røde rubin* (1956). That none of these names are in common usage amplifies the clear reference to the mythological figures and the universal qualities they can be seen to embody.

The impression given by subtle allusion to Norse myth in this century, however, has been overshadowed by the impact of racist National Socialist propaganda.

## FROM NATION-BUILDING TO NATIONAL SOCIALISM

Nazi use of myth is linked by Lars Lönnroth to the earlier nineteenth century traditions described above:

Det är först i 1800-talsromantikernas och speciellt i Wagners gestaltning som det nordiska sublima förvandlas till kult och samtidigt till en angelägenhet för hela nationen - en helig tradition att vörda för sanna germaner eller nordbor. Eddan framstår inte bara som en inspirations källa för poesin utan också som ett slags germansk bibel. Först då får den också politisk språngkraft. På 1900-talet urartar drömmen om det nordiska sublima till sist i Hitlers Ragnarok.

(Lönnroth, 1996: 113)

[It was first in the portrayal by the Romantics and particularly by Wagner that the Nordic sublime was transformed to cult and at the same time to a concern for the nation as a whole - a holy tradition to be revered by true Germanics or Scandinavians. The *Edda* is presented not just as a source of inspiration for poetry, but also as a sort of Germanic bible. It was only then it became an explosive political force. In the 1900's the dream of the Nordic sublime degenerates finally to Hitler's Ragnarok.]

During the Nazi era, Viking imagery was exploited in National Socialist propaganda. The work of Alfred Rosenberg *Der Mythos des XX Jahrhunderts* [Myth of the Twentieth Century] (1939) combines the Norse/Germanic myths and legends with other Indo-European traditions to form an Aryan system. In *The Feminist*

*Companion to Mythology* Carolyn Larrington describes the style of rhetoric

Rosenberg inspired:

A popular propaganda image was that of Hitler as the Hero awakening Germany, the sleeping Valkyrie, an image deriving its potency from the ancient motif of the land as bride to the king, the approaching conqueror as the husband who will sexually awaken her and make her fertile.

(Larrington, 1992: 159)

The mythical allusions of Nazi Germany were also adopted by the indigenous National Socialist movements in the Scandinavian countries. The symbol of Thor's hammer, Mjølner, was used widely, for instance in nazi anthems (see illustration III, page 44)).

Articles in the Norwegian Nazi party's monthly periodical, *NS Månedshäfte*, make frequent reference to the glorious Viking past and an article by 'Kai Normann' in February 1943 takes the verses describing the lead-up to Ragnarok - the downfall of the gods - in *Völuspá* as a prediction of the turmoil and destruction of the Second World War to be followed by a National Socialist golden age. The author takes symbols directly from one of *Völuspá*'s most ominous verses:

32    Brothers will die,        slain by theirr brothers,  
       Kinsmen betray        their close kin;  
       woe to the world then,        wedded to whoredom;  
       battle-axe and sword rule,    split shields asunder,  
       storm-cleft age of wolves     until the world goes down  
       only hatred     in the hearts of men.

(*Elder Edda*, 1990: 5)

writing:

Vi lever enda ikke i fredens og gudsrikets forjettede tidsalder, vår tid er sverdets tid, jerntid, ulvetid. (Normann, 1943: 57)

[We are still not living in the promised age of peace and the kingdom of God, our time is the time of the sword, time of iron, time of wolves.]

## Illustration III

Icelandic Nazi  
anthem taking  
political  
symbolism  
from Thor's  
hammer Mjöllnir.



## Mjöllnir.

*Mjöllnir vort merki  
meitlað af sterkri  
munðu þess áss, sem að eldingin laut.  
Steinhamar sterki  
styrk oss á merkri  
stjörnmála, frægðar- og framfara braut.  
Hærra! Hærra við stefnum.  
Hærra, orðtak okkar er!  
Sameinadir stöndum.  
sigurs lyftum bröndum.  
sigrum, fellum fenda her!*

*Einkenni æsku.  
ættjarðar þrjúði.  
alla tíð hlaktu á þjóðlegum meid.  
Girandaðu græzku.  
gunguskaþ, niði.  
frá glötun og vesaldóm sjn okkur leid.  
Hærra! Hærra við stefnum.  
Hærra, orðtak okkar er!  
Sameinadir stöndum.  
sigurs lyftum bröndum.  
sigrum, fellum fenda her!*

*Réttlætið ríki.  
ranglætið fljó.  
renni með þjóðinni aftur upp sól.  
Varmennska ríki.  
velmegun stigi.  
vakni það líf, sem í neyðinni kól.  
Hærra! Hærra við stefnum.  
Hærra, orðtak okkar er!  
Sameinadir stöndum.  
sigurs lyftum bröndum.  
sigrum, fellum fenda her!*

Krummi.

Inevitably in the post-war period the connection in people's minds between Norse myth and Nazism has remained deep-rooted and aroused passionate feelings. The author Erling Kittelsen (see Section II, Chapter 7 on his poetry cycle *HUN*) describes Nazi ideology use of Norse myth as rape (Kittelsen, 1989), and Tor Åge Bringsværd voicing strong opinions regarding the results of Nazi appropriation of Norse myth and symbols, writes:

Quisling og hans folk røvet på en måte hele vikingtiden fra oss. De brukte norrøne tegn og symboler på nesten alt de drev med. Ja, selve runealfabetet stjal de! Idag er det utenkelig i en norsk avis eller et norsk tidsskrift å lage overskrifter med bokstaver som minner om tilnærmet runeskrift - vi vil jo ikke at folk skal tro vi er "brune". Solkorset er blitt et umulig symbol i Norge. Gode, gamle norrøne ord er bannlyst fra språket. Og myten fulgte med i dragsuget da vi gjorde opp med landsvikerne etter krigen. Med andre ord: Vi slo barnet ut med badevannet. Nazistene tok fra oss omtrent hele vår gamle norrøne kultur. Og vi sto bare helt rolige og lot det skje. Selv etterpå - selv lenge etterpå har vi aldeles glemt å kreve tilbake det som vitterlig er vårt. (Bringsværd, 1991: 76)

[Quisling and his people stole in a way the entire Viking age from us. They used Norse signs and symbols on almost everything they did. They even stole the runic alphabet! Today it would be unthinkable for a Norwegian newspaper or periodical to write a headline with letters reminiscent of approximated runic letters - we simply do not want people to think that we are "brown". The sun cross has become a symbol one can not use in Norway. Good, old Norse words have been banished from the language. And myth was swept along in the current when we dealt with those who had betrayed the country after the war. In other words: we threw the baby out with the bath water. The Nazis took almost all our old Norse culture from us. And we just stood back calmly and let it happen. Even afterwards - even a long time afterwards - we have simply forgotten to demand back that which is actually ours.]

While one can feel some sympathy for Bringsværd's view, it is not possible (or necessarily entirely desirable) to remove the unpleasant associations left by Nazi use



of Norse symbolism. It would, for instance, be crass and inappropriate to reappropriate the ancient Germanic symbol of the hooked cross now known world-wide as a symbol of Nazism - the swastika. The use of myth, and mythical symbolism inevitably becomes incorporated into the myth itself. Myth, like language, develops and acquires additional content and significance, while still retaining the earlier meanings to a lesser or greater degree. To demand that we return to previous meanings and significances of mythology, and simply ignore later undesirable meanings, is as futile as attempting to turn back the development of a living language.

The reception of Norse myth generally is a process involving not only the early medieval texts, but also later texts, as can be seen from the chain of influence by which authors gain inspiration from earlier writers to return to the *Eddas* in their creative work. The intertextual use of mythology includes any number of texts influencing an author to re-use Norse myth.

The presence of a negative 'meaning' or use of the myth, however, does not rule out the production of opposite ones simultaneously, as an example of resistance groups during World War II demonstrates. The Norse gods were also mobilised in support of the anti-Nazi cause, and Lars Lönnroth cites the example of the Danish resistance movement during the occupation of 1940 - 1945, and among other examples mentions Aage Møller, a Grundtvigian priest from South Jutland, who heralded those fighting the Nazis as belonging to "asarnas ätt" [the race of gods] (Lönnroth, 1996: 164).

Norse rhetoric employed by Møller is also quoted in the essay collection *Livstydning i den nordiske mytologi* [Concepts of life in Nordic mythology]:



Der må altid regnes med et vist antal jætter i ethvert folk, men der kan være folkeslag, hvor de har tilrevet sig en så betydelig del af magten, så hele folket får sit præg af jættevæsenent (...) Det tyske folk kan nævnes som eksempel på hvordan jætter kan tage magten. I enhver henseende er dette folk i vore dage præget af jætters tankegang og følemåde.

(Esbjorn Holck, 1986: 37)

[One must always count upon a certain number of giants in every people, but there can be peoples, where they have seized such a considerable proportion of power, so the whole nation gains the characteristics of the giant (...) The German people might be mentioned as an example of how giants can take power. In every respect is this people in our day characterised by the mind-set and emotions of giants.]

## **THE PRESENCE OF NORSE MYTHOLOGY IN CONTEMPORARY SCANDINAVIA**

The presence of Norse imagery within diametrically opposed ethical arguments demonstrates the openness of the mythological material, and a wide range of use of Norse myth continues to this day. On the political right, echoes of the Nazi use of Norse myth is found in the rhetoric of marginal political groups (an additional reason why Bringsværd's attempt to wipe out the legacy of Nazi use of myth is futile) and in the words and actions of such politically extreme characters such as "Greven" in Norway, (see figure IV, page 48) who was tried for murder and the burning of churches, and whose defence during his trial in 1994 came from his religious and political viewpoint as a heathen. On the political left, as we will see in Section II, a number of contemporary authors employ Norse myths in support of very different messages.

8 Onsdag 20. april 1994

Dagbladet

# — JEG ER ODINS OG SATANS SØNN

## — og finansieres av Ku Klux Klan

Drapstiltalte Varg «Greven» Vikernes (21) har brukt mye av tida i varetekt til å brevveksle med satanister og rasister over store deler av verden. — Vi samar-

beider med mer eller mindre likesinnede som Ku Klux Klan og Church of Satan. I Norge har jeg hatt kontakt med rundt 200 personer, sier han.



**FÅR STØTTE:** Trøya til drapstiltalte Varg «Greven» Vikernes viser symbolet til den fryktede hemmelige organisasjonen Ku Klux Klan. — Noen som er med der har tatt kostnadene med å trykke platene mine, sier han. (Foto: Jørn H. Moen)

### Vil styre moralen

— Jeg lever og ånder for å styre propagandaen utenfor fengselmurene. Jeg vil styre moralen og påvirke ungdom før de blir hjemmevasket av andre, sier Varg Vikernes.

Han erkjenner overfor Dagbladet at han har sendt et brev til en person hvor han har uttrykt hva han mener om tystere. Politiet har fryktet for at han skulle påvirke vitner i straffesaken, men han hevder han ikke har sendt slike brev til noen som står på vitneplista.

— Årsaken til at jeg nektet å vitne i straffesaken mot Bård Eithun var at jeg ikke ville tyste på ham, forklarer han.

— Hva mener du om å brenne kirker?

— Det jeg sier nå har ingenting med skyldspørsmålet i straffesaken å gjøre, men jeg mener det er blasfemi å bygge kirker på Odins jord. Norge er Odins jord.

Det er de som bygger kirker som begår en forbrytelse, ikke de som brenner dem ned.



**SMILER:** — Jeg er en blid og sosial mann, sier Varg «Greven» Vikernes og viser oss at han kan le. (Foto: Jørn H. Moen)

### — Jeg er sosial

— Jeg er en blid og sosial mann. Når det er flint vær kan jeg slikke sol gjennom gitteret i fengselscella mi. I fengslet er folk greie. Jeg har det bra, men det er ikke det som betyr noe.

Varg «Greven» Vikernes er opptatt av å få justert inntrykket som er skapt av ham i pressen.

— Jeg er ikke opptatt av det svarte. Årsaken til at jeg farget håret mitt svart i 1992 var at folk sa jeg var så blek. For å få fram den bleke huden min farget jeg håret.

Det skal jeg aldri gjøre mer. Jeg er stolt av å ha blondt hår, blå øyne og hvit hud. Det lange håret vil jeg beholde fordi høvdinger har langt hår mens treller har kort hår.

Han sier han ikke har brukt mye tid til å tenke på at han er tiltalt i en av de alvorligste kriminalsakene i nyere norsk kriminalhistorie og at strafferammen er på 21 års fengsel.

Han har brukt mye tid sammen med de to rettspsykiatriske sakkyndige Karl Ewert Horneman og Reidar Larsen. De har konkludert med at han er straffettslig tilregnelig.

Av LEIF STANG

Han tar imot Dagbladet i besøksrommet i Oslo kretsfengsel, avdeling B.

Under den mer kjente Burzum-trøya si har han trukket på seg et trøye påtrykket en blodig sirkel med dedninghoder og to knyttede never festet i handjern. Det er merket til den fryktede og hemmelige, amerikanske organisasjonen Ku Klux Klan.

— Folk som er med i Ku Klux Klan i Florida har tatt kostnadene med å trykke opp en del av platene og trøyene mine fordi de synes budskapet mitt er noe de vil formidle. Church of Satan i den franske byen Metz er også formidlere av mine produkter. Vi samarbeider med alle som er mer eller mindre likesinnede, forteller han.

#### — Sønner av Satan

Plateselskapet som trykker platene hans i San Francisco har navnet Necropolis. Han sier han også har en fanklubb i Florida, som består av medlemmer i Ku Klux Klan.

«Greven» sier han er Odins sønn, at Odin betyr motsetning til Gud og at han dermed også er Satans sønn.

— Det er en selvinnylende sannhet. Enten vil vil eller ei er alle nordmenn sønner av Satan av natur. Jeg tror ikke på den antropoide (menneskeliknende) guddommeligheten.

Han understreker at han ikke er en satanist som tror på en djevelfigur eller som driver djevledyrkelse.

#### Superelite

— Jeg er ikke rasist for jeg hater ikke andre raser. Jeg elsker min egen rase og vil bevare den slik den er. Mennesker av andre raser må holde seg der de er og ikke blande kulturer.

— De vanlige satanistene snakker om eliten. Nazistene snakker om eliterasen. Vi snakker om eliten av eliterasen. Derfor kan vi samarbeide med begge disse gruppene. Beskjedenhet er en krisens verdi.

— Vi har ærlighet som verdi, men jeg kan lyve så mye jeg vil til kristne mennesker for å skape kaos. Nå er vi ferdige med forvirringsfasen. Nå skal vi vise Odineyet.

#### Mange brev

«Greven» har sittet varetektssengslet siden han ble pågrepet i Bergen natt til 20. august i fjor. Tida har han brukt til å lese en mengde litteratur, forberede et eget propagandaskrift kalt «Vargsmål» og skrive sju, åtte brev hver dag.

— I uka før jeg ble ilagt brev og besøkskontroll igjen i mars, skrev jeg og sendte mer enn 30 brev hver eneste dag. Jeg oppfordret folk til ikke å skrive brev til meg under perioden med kontroll.

Han hevder også at han har mottatt i gjennomsnitt sju, åtte brev hver dag med unntak av den siste måneden.

#### — 200 i miljøet

— Jeg regner med at det er rundt 200 personer i Norge som hører til mitt miljø, men jeg vet ikke hvor langt alle vil gå i å utveie ideologien. Det er også mange miljøer i miljøene. Jeg har kontakter i hele landet fra Alta i nord til Kristiansand i sør. Stord i vest og Askim i øst. Politiet vil aldri klare å splitte det.

— Jeg skriver med mange guttier i ung og eldre alder. Ungdom er naturlig germanisk og ikke hjemmevasket ennå, sier Varg Vikernes.

Illustration IV. News report of murder trial of Neo-Odinist, "Greven" in Norway.

In his essay "Postmoderna asadyrkare" [Post-modernist Aesir worshippers], Lars Lönnroth refers extensively to a doctoral thesis by German scholar Stefanie von Schnurbein<sup>10</sup>, and writes:

Det är en mycket exotisk och rätt oenhetlig skara hedniska sekterister som träder en til mötes (...) Där finns fasister och nynazistiska svärmare som förläst sig på "arisk" mystik från Hitlertiden. Men där finns också grånade hippies, New Age-romantiker och fruktbarhetsdyrkande grönvågare med rötter i 60-talets okultism och "alternativa" rörelse. Deras tro på asagudarna blandas ofta med tro på häxor, schamaner, druider, Den Stora Urmodern eller obskyra gudomligheter av keltisk eller indianisk härstamning.

(Lönnroth, 1996: 209-210)

[One is met by an extremely exotic and rather disparate band of heathen sect members (...) Fascist and neo-Nazi idealists who have read too much about "Aryan" mysticism from the time of Hitler. But there are also ageing hippies, New Age romantics and fertility worshipping travellers with their roots in the occultism and alternative movements of the sixties. Their belief in the Aesir gods is often combined with a belief in witches, shaman, druids, The Great Earth Mother or obscure deities of Celtic or Indian origin.]

Among the symbols picked up on by this diverse band of self-declared Aesir worshippers, and which is also widely worn as a fashion accessory in Scandinavia, is Thor's hammer. Originally the wearing of the hammer was introduced in pagan Scandinavia copying the Christian trend of wearing a crucifix, and it is ironic that as Christian belief declines, the wearing of the symbol of Thor's hammer should be growing<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> *Religion als Kulturkritikk. Neugermanisches Heidentrum im 20. Jahrhundert*, (1993) [Religion as Cultural Criticism. Neo-Germanic heathenism in the twentieth century]

<sup>11</sup> Further irony can be found in the widespread promotion of a gift edition of *Hávamál* in Norwegian bookshop windows every spring as a suitable confirmation present.

## VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF NORSE MYTHOLOGY

The artistic representation of Norse gods changes over time, in the same way as in literary renditions. Illustrations of the ancient texts from the eighteenth century show the gods in *medieval* costumes (see illustration V, page 51), and writing about the nineteenth century, Rolf Köhler describes how:

Det er betegnende, at forrige århundredes illustratører til Den nordiske Mytologi ikke interesserer sig for dens magiske handlinger - i hvert fald ikke i deres billeder. Det første 'hold' af illustratører arbejder snævert med at billedgøre de mulige forbindelse mellem *fysiognomi* og gudernes *egenskaber*. Det er *idealer*, der skal opstilles, og det skildres billedmæssigt ved at kredse om deres udseende og deres handlinger i et illuderende billedarbejde.

(Köhler, 1986: 138)

[It is notable that nineteenth century illustrators of Nordic mythology were not interested in their magical acts - in any case not in their pictures. The main group of the illustrators work narrowly with portraying the possible link between *physiognomy* and the gods' *qualities*. It is *ideals* which are being displayed, and this is portrayed pictorially by alluding to their appearance and their acts in a convincing work of art.]

The concerns of the age can be seen in Victorian illustrations, for instance in Arthur Rackham's portrayal of Freyja we see a coyly submissive goddess (see page 52).

Artistic representations of the Norse myths and gods show a broad range of possibilities, as a project in Norway in which Bringsværd re-wrote the myths for a series of twelve picture books published between 1985 and 1995 shows. Each volume is illustrated by a different artist, and many of the gods appear in modern guises, for instance in the portrayal of Loki (see figure VII, page 53). However, many of the illustrations from the series demonstrate a more "archaic" approach<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Even the paper on which works reusing mythology are bound in or printed on can have an impact on the impression the reader is given of the work as a whole - for instance, the new translation to Danish of *Völuspá* by Suzanne Brøgger (1994) is printed in its paperback edition on rough uncut paper, with a primitive cover design, with earthy colours, suggesting age and tradition.











Illustration VII

Arne Samuelsen's portrayal of Loki captures the ambivalence and ambiguities in his character.

(see figure VII, page 55). Bringsværd's choice to employ a variety of artists reflects his desire to keep the representation of the gods open, and he points to the uniform picture conjured up of the troll formed by Theodor Kittelsen's (1857 - 1914) paintings from the turn of the century (Bringsværd, 1991).

The strength of imagery that the myths can provide can also be seen in the work of Norwegian artist Sverre Dybing (see figure IX, page 56) whose work of the last few years has drawn particularly on the Eddic poems, especially *Völuspá* and on the medieval folk song *Draumkvedet* [The Dream Ballad].

## THOR THE SUPERHERO

In an entirely different context, the portrayal of gods is also found in graphic novels. Thor's starring role in the twentieth century is that of the superhero. Rolf Köhler describes how Thor with his hammer can be transported into different contexts such as the Marvel Comics Group's comic book series "The Mighty Thor" in which Thor is clearly a figure fighting on the side of good in the role of a superhero like the Incredible Hulk, or Spiderman (see figure X, page 57):

Det er hammeren, der gør, at Tor som figur kan løsrives fra Valhal's mytologiske univers og uden videre indlemmes i (...) tegneserie. (...) Løsrevet fra sin mytologi og dens personifikationer bliver han som de andre 'heroer' i det godes navn en kampligerlig funktionalitet, en ren underholdende fiktion.

(Köhler, 1987: 131-132)

[It is the hammer which makes it possible for Thor as a character to be detached from the mythological universe of Valhalla and just be inserted into cartoons (...) Detached from his mythology and its personifications he becomes like the other 'heroes' in the name of good, a warrior-like? functionality, a purely entertaining fiction.]



## Illustration VIII

Therese Nortvedt's macabre illustrations for Tor Åge Bringsværd's *Ragnarok* give an impressionistic and "archaic" portrayal of the Sibyl's prophecies of doom.





## Illustration IX

Sverre Dybing's *Før Fimbul* captures the power of the build up to Ragnarok against the backdrop of a Nordic landscape.





Illustration X

Marvel Comics Group's *The Mighty Thor*. Thor's twentieth century role as the powerful superhero on the side of good fighting the forces of evil. 57



Thor slips into his role as super hero effortlessly: the fantastical elements of the mythology transpose straightforwardly to become science-fiction. The comic strips as an element of popular culture can also be seen to be a genre close to mythology.

Mircea Eliade describes the mythological significance of the comic strips:

The characters of the comic strips present the modern version of mythological or folklore Heroes (...) In the last analysis, the myth of Superman satisfies the secret longings of modern man who, though he knows that he is a fallen, limited creature dreams of one day proving himself an "exceptional person", a "Hero".

(Eliade, 1989: 185)

Within Scandinavia echoes of Thor's role in the Marvel comics as a mighty superhero can be seen in the graphic novels by Danish cartoonist Peter Madsen. The gods as we meet them in the *Valhalla* series bear a considerable resemblance to the often burlesque portrayal of the Norse gods in the *Eddas*, and Madsen's Thor also has superhero quality. The giants are portrayed as ugly trolls, and Thor is mighty. The graphic novel has a largely male readership, and love goddess Freyja (see figure XI, page 59) fulfils all the requirements of a pin-up from a magazine, and is very different to the earlier Victorian portrayal above (page 51).

In the twentieth century the gods are found in all media, and the first volume in the *Valhalla* series, *Ulven er løs* [The wolf is loose] (1979) has been animated. In his Marvel comic guise Thor appears alongside the Incredible Hulk, and the extent to which myth enters science fiction can be seen in the use of Norse myth in the American TV-series, *The New Adventures of Superman* (first shown in the UK in 1995) which includes an episode in which a US hospital project (code name Valhalla) sets out to create the perfect assassin. The plot, eventually foiled by Superman,



## Illustration XI

Peter Madsen's sexually liberated Freja attempts to seduce the love shy Heimdal.



works on the principle of sending brainwashed "Valkyries" to go out and collect fallen "warriors".

In an even more recent development, allusion to the Norse myths has entered virtual reality (a quasi-mythical concept in itself) and the Norwegian government information website on the World Wide Web is ODIN, accessed on <http://odin.dep.no/>.

### THOR AS A PR MAN

The cultural significance of the myths is also capitalised upon by the Scandinavian oil industry in an attempt to appropriate the qualities attributed to the myths and mythological figures to promote their industry. Generally we can see that the myths are being held up as representative of a noble past. A major advertising campaign in 1994 by one of the main oil companies in Norway used the image of Thor in his chariot from a Romantic painting. Attaching the names of figures from myths and legends such industries acquire associations from the myths, and in *Livstydning i den nordiske mytologi*, Ole Pedersen says of the trend to give Norwegian oil fields, and platforms names from Norse mythology such as 'Odin', 'Tor', 'Sleipner', and 'Valhall':

Når olie- og gasfelterne i Nordsøen således opkaldes med navne fra de nordiske myte- og sagnfortællinger, såer det egentlig et pseudo-historisk svindelnummer. Den højteknologiske olie- og naturgasindustri formummer sit væsen bag de positive verdier, som vi forbinder med de nordiske gude- og heltesagn. Der bores ned i oldtidens arkæologiske lag, og de råstoffer der hentes op er oprindelig dansk natur. (Pedersen, 1986: 7)

[When the oil and gas fields in the North Sea are given names from the Nordic myths and legends in this way, it is essentially a pseudo-historical confidence trick. The high technology oil and natural gas industry are masking their character behind the positive values which we connect with the Nordic legends of gods and heroes. They are boring down into the archaeological layers of antiquity, and the raw materials which is being extracted are original Danish nature.]





Illustration XII

Street names in Reykjavik named after Odin and Thor. Similar street names can be found throughout Scandinavia.

The portrayal of the commercial use of myth as a confidence trick can be similar to the way that an author draws upon the cultural prestige attributed to mythology by intertextual use of myth. In a promotional context, however, the *intention* to exploit the legitimising nature of mythology becomes more explicit. The extent to which use of mythology by authors can be seen to be an equally intentional ploy used to support underlying themes in their work will be one of the themes discussed with regard to the core texts to be presented in the following section



## SECTION TWO

### APPROACHES TO RAGNAROK

*Brothers will die   slain by their brothers,  
kinsmen betray   their close kin;  
woe to the world then,   wedded to whoredom,  
battle-axe and sword rule, split shields asunder,  
storm-cleft age of wolves   until the world goes down,  
only hatred   in the hearts of men.*

*Völuspá: 32*

## CHAPTER ONE: OVERVIEW OF CORE TEXTS

We have seen in the introductory section how there is a long tradition of use of Norse mythology. Within literature Norse myths have been reinterpreted both in the light of the political and social concerns of the time, and also building upon earlier intertextual re-interpretations. The principal reason for the continued survival and use of ancient mythologies is the range of possibilities they present for re-interpretation by different generations and ideologies.

In the following chapters, the focus will be on the reception of Norse mythology in contemporary Scandinavian literature. Through the presentation of a number of works an examination will be made of the extent to which the writers concerned can be seen to be following in the tradition identified in the previous section, and how far their use can be seen to embody "generational" features.

The first book to be discussed in depth (Chapter 2) will be *Ragnarok* [Downfall of the Gods] by Danish author Villy Sørensen, which provoked considerable interest and controversy when it was first published in 1982. The ground-breaking allegorical adaptation of the Eddic stories parallels the dangers of the duality of the Norse cosmos, where gods and giants are in opposition, with a cold war situation that concludes in a nuclear holocaust-style environmental collapse.

Sørensen's book can be seen to approach the mythological material from a revisionist angle; not only does his work challenge social divisions, but it attacks the culturally accepted version of the mythology which in Denmark has for the past 150 years or so

been defined from a Grundtvigian moral perspective. The debate this approach prompted will also be discussed.

The chapter on *Ragnarok* will be followed by a presentation of the novel *Kärleksguden Frö* [The Love God Frö] by Swedish author Torgny Lindgren (Chapter 3) which takes a very different approach to the earlier novel.

*Kärleksguden Frö* portrays Ragnarok as a cyclical event rather than the prelude to a final catastrophe. This cyclical element ties in with the novel's circularity in which time is deconstructed and the narrative is taken beyond the novelistic present. The book combines Lindgren's familiar legendary style with Norse mythology and takes the form of a biography of Frö [Freyr], the Norse god of love. The sexuality portrayed in the myths today appears unconventional, and Torgny Lindgren particularly capitalises on the carnivalesque aspects of myth, which only appear as undertones in Villy Sørensen's streamlined portrayal.

The fourth chapter will discuss *Gunnlaðar saga* [The story about Gunnlod] (1987) by Icelandic writer Svava Jakobsdóttir which sets fantastical elements of myth against a contemporary Danish backdrop with a powerful and positive revisionist approach. This novel was nominated for Nordisk Råds Pris for literature in 1990, and is translated into all Scandinavian languages. The analysis refers primarily to the Danish translation *Historien om Gunlød*.

Jakobsdóttir was, as mentioned above, prompted by the inconsistency between Snorri's version of the story of Odin's acquisition of the mead of poetic inspiration and the poetic source in *Hávamál* to search beyond the standard version based on Snorri.

The novel that was result of her research rewrites the myth, empowering the female figure of Gunnlod.

Composed on two time planes - the Danish Bronze Age, and modern Copenhagen - Jakobsdóttir's novel is ostensibly the story of Dis, an Icelandic girl arrested in Denmark for stealing a priceless chalice. Although separate stories unfold on the two levels, they are interwoven through imagery, language, and allusions and through the character of Dis who relives Gunnlod's experiences. The imbalance created by Odin's betrayal in the past is paralleled to social and environmental crisis at the time of the Chernobyl accident, and as with Sørensen's *Ragnarok*, the image of nuclear catastrophe is linked to the mythical Ragnarok.

Chapter five will discuss *Ravn og due* (1989) [Raven and dove] a historical novel by Norwegian Vera Henriksen, placing Norse myth in its historical, religious context. Henriksen's novel is set in the period of the Icelandic conversion to Christianity in the year 1000 AD, and is the third part of a trilogy centring on the life of Bodvar, fictional grandson of the historical skald Egil Skallagrimson. Bodvar's spiritual crisis is portrayed as a personal Ragnarok, and he is torn between the old and new religions. The personal tensions within the novel are juxtaposed with the political and religious crisis in Iceland at the time, and the character of Bodvar is portrayed as the author of *Völuspá* in which he works through his religious crisis.

Henriksen stresses the "historicity" of her novel, and her blending of fictional and historical characters and events raises the issue, relevant to all the works included, of how far an author has a responsibility to portray history and mythology accurately.

Following the presentation of re-use of myth in the four novels, the remaining chapters in Section II will concentrate on other literary modes, and Chapters six and seven will present the work of two Norwegian poets.

Mythical imagery and allusion occurs frequently in poetry, however, the presence of Norse mythology in poetry seems surprisingly small. Tor Obrestad in *Misteltein* [Mistletoe] published in 1988 (Chapter 6) and Erling Kittelsen with his work *HUN* [SHE] from 1989 (Chapter 7) have, however, produced major contemporary works of poetry with a high degree of use of mythology. Their works are written in *nynorsk* and *bokmål* respectively and the poetry cycles are written on different mythological themes. Obrestad's work takes the story of the death of the god Balder as a central motif, and has three principal voices - a modern day Balder, a poet, and a factory worker Schrøder. While a number of the poems are clearly mythological in theme and content, and many of the mythological motifs recur throughout, most chart everyday events and individuals both in Norway and in the wider world.

The vision of Ragnarok as described in *Völuspá* is again a central element in *HUN*, and Erling Kittelsen takes intertextuality to its extreme by including the whole of the text of the Eddic poem alongside his own annotated translation and poetic response, and the intertextual dialogue this creates links mythical themes to the modern world.

The eighth chapter of literary analysis concentrates on works for young people and children. Through looking at a variety of texts an examination will be made of the broad appeal of myth to young people, and the effect on the ideological subtext of the demand for a happy ending in literature written for a youth market. The central texts in this chapter are aimed at twelve to fifteen year olds, although some works for the

younger audience will also be covered.

One of the central themes emerging in this chapter is that of 'the quest', which leads to maturation, and in *Erik Mennekeson* [Erik Humanson] (1986) by Danish author Lars-Henrik Olsen, a contemporary teenager Erik is whisked off to Asgård by the god Tor to rescue the gods from the threat of Ragnarok. Erik's journey across the Norse cosmological landscape in search of the goddess Idun and her stolen apples can be likened to a rite of passage that culminates in his acceptance as an adult. A similar maturation process can be seen to occur in Norwegian author, Torill Thorstad Hauger's novel *Ravnejenta* [The raven girl] (1989) in which the heroine has to find out her true identity, and choose between good and evil. *Ravnejenta* also brings about reconciliation between warring factions in society. This reconciliation on an inner and outer plane is also present in *Drakeblod. Vegen til Asgård* [Dragon blood. The road to Asgard] (1990) by another Norwegian writer, Idar Lind. This book continues the story of *Drakeblod. Det kvite spydet* [Dragon blood. The white spear], in which Geirr a twentieth century blind boy is transported to a different dimension in which he has sight. In *Vegen til Asgård* Geirr, and his companions continue the search for the road to Asgård which it is Geirr's fate to re-open and once more allow humans contact with their gods, thereby bringing peace and prosperity to the ravaged and oppressed world. This outer quest is mirrored by Geirr's companion Ragni's inner quest for peace as she comes to terms with her unwanted child.

Much of the comparison between the works will take place in the context of the textual analysis, however the discussion in the conclusion in Section III will draw up an overall picture of the dominant themes, and examine the extent to which themes common to the works can be generational.

## CHAPTER TWO: RAGNAROK IN OUR TIME

### VILLY SØRENSEN'S *RAGNAROK*

In Denmark the nineteenth and twentieth century view of Norse mythology has been largely based on the interpretation of N F S Grundtvig, which was presented in the introductory section (see pages 34 - 37).

The strength of this Grundtvigian tradition was demonstrated by the interest and furore provoked in Denmark by a small volume published in 1982. The work that caused such debate was Villy Sørensen's "gudefortælling" [tale of the gods] *Ragnarok* [Downfall of the Gods] which reworks the mythological material to create a contemporary political allegory warning of the dangers of political and social division.

#### *VILLY SØRENSEN*

Villy Sørensen has had a long and diverse career as a writer. His debut in 1953 with the collection of short stories *Sære historier* [Strange stories], came at the height of the Cold War and marked him out as an author with a distinctive style. The style of his grotesque and humorous tales went against the general trend within Danish literature of the 1950's, characterised by the serious and introspective Heretica-group and owes more in tone to the nineteenth century satirical tales of fellow countryman Hans Christian Andersen .

Sørensen's work can be broadly defined as modernistic particularly in his preoccupation with division on all levels - political, psychological, theological, and sociological - which is a central theme in his authorship (Thomsen, 1990).

Sørensen has also produced a number of non-fictional works, and a work - *Apollons oprør* [Apollo's revolt] (1989) - that combines fiction with non-fiction. His works deal with subjects as diverse as Kafka (*Kafkas digtning* [Kafka's writing], 1968) and Jesus Christ (*Jesus og KRISTUS* [Jesus and CHRIST] 1992). It was through the task of revising his work on Nietzsche (*Nietzsche*, 1963) that he came to write *Ragnarok* (Sørensen, 1983).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> According to Sørensen it was while revising the book on Nietzsche that he read Cosima Wagner's diary, ostensibly in connection with Nietzsche's visiting Richard Wagner but leading him to become interested in Wagner's sources for the Ring Cycle, and later being asked to write about the myths for a programme for the Ring Cycle. He also attributes some of the inspiration to a dream (Sørensen 1983)



## **RAGNAROK - A PLOT**

*Ragnarok* opens with the line "Der var en gang en verden" (p 7) [Once upon a time there was a world]<sup>2</sup>, and this ostensibly innocent fairy-tale opening indicates from the start that the world portrayed has ceased to exist.

Throughout *Ragnarok* the reader is confronted by a strong message of the dangers of the political strategies of a Cold War situation (see illustration XIII, page 72). From the beginning, the divisions within the doomed world are apparent. The gods in Asgård [Asgard], with the big-brother figure of Odin at their head, have clearly defined enemies - the giants of Udgård [Utgard], who - despite the gods' paranoid fear and hatred of them - come across as conciliatory and peace-loving (they only attack in a final defensive retaliation to the gods' constant and unprovoked aggression). The gods are also physically divided from the humans who live in Midgård [Midgard] which lies between the two camps and supplies dead warriors for Odin's army.

External division is mirrored by internal division: the two families of gods - the Aser [Aesir] and the Vaner [Vanir]. The reader is told that they:

havde ligget i strid med hindanden, men det var længe siden. (p 12)  
[had quarrelled with one another, but that was a long time ago]

But the narrative continues:

de var ikke enige om hvad der dengang var sket. (p 12)  
[they disagreed about what had really happened.]

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<sup>2</sup> Page references refer to the 2 ed. given out by Centrums Paperbacks, 1991. English Translation from *The Downfall of the Gods*, translated by Paula Hostrup-Jessen, University of Nebraska Press, 1989.

## Illustration XIII

Front cover of 1991 paperback edition of *Ragnarok* shows Thor's hammer Mjollnir as a missile hurtling towards the planet, and emphasises the allegorical message.

# Villy Sørensen

## RAGNAROK EN GUDEFORTÆLLING



CENTRUMS  
PAPERBACKS

„En gysende, kildrende  
fryd at læse.“

Poul Borum,  
Ekstra Bladet.



The continued disagreement suggested by this gains a greater significance as it becomes increasingly clear just how uneasy an alliance the gods have. The two families are incompatible. The difference in their natures suggested by their conflicting roles (the Aser are primarily gods of war, and the Vaner are primarily gods of love) is reflected in the physical dissimilarities between the families: with the exception of red-haired Tor [Thor], the Aser are blond and blue-eyed, and the Vaner are portrayed as having black hair and brown eyes.

The narrative in *Ragnarok* is built up from episodes familiar from Snorri's *Edda* such as the story of Tor's fishing trip (see illustration XIV, page 74, and illustration XV, page 75), and the building of the wall around Asgård by the giant-builder. Sørensen links the episodes together so that the consequences of one - in itself of limited significance - are carried through into the next. Thus we see how the abduction of the goddess Ydun [Idun] and her youth-giving apples by the giant Tjasse [Thiazi] ("Ydun og hendes æbler" [Idun and Her Apples]) leads to Tjasse being killed, and consequently to his daughter Skade [Skadi] seeking compensation which she gets in the form of a husband - the god Njord. The alliance of Njord, a Vaner, to a giantess (albeit in an unhappy marriage), and his son Frej's [Freyr's] subsequent marriage to another giant - Gerda [Gerd] - demonstrates that the giants are on the whole conciliatory. However these alliances further split the gods. The true enemy of the gods can be seen to be their own short-sightedness and the killings of giants by Tor (for example of Hrugner [Hrugin], and a number of the giants attending his "wedding" to the giant Trym [Thrym]), and the manner in which all the gods in Asgård appear to be working with their own self-interest foremost propels events progressively towards Ragnarok.



Illustration XIV. 'Tors fisketur'

As this depiction of Thor's fishing trip shows, Andy Li Jørgensen's illustrations in the Danish editions of *Ragnarok* have a style familiar from children's books, and it is perhaps in part have been for this reason that the allegory was placed in children's sections of many Danish libraries. In contrast the English translation, *The Downfall of the Gods*, has a different set of illustrations (see over) by Michael McMurdy. McMurdy's woodcuts indicate the book is being marketed to an adult readership, and the style suggests that Viking connections are being played up.





Illustration XV

Michael McMurdy's woodcuts from *The Downfall of the Gods*

- i: 'Gods and Giants'
- ii 'Thor goes Fishing'



Throughout the novel Balder - whom Sørensen gives the role of the god of justice - has prophetic dreams of his death and of Ragnarok, and it is the consequences of his death that trigger the gods' final downfall, the portrayal of which concludes the book.

The ultimate downfall of the gods is brought about by a chain of events for which no individual god is entirely responsible, but which is exacerbated by the fundamental division within Asgård.

Superficially the system of government in Asgård has a semblance of democracy. All the gods, with the exception of Hod [Hoder], have specific roles resembling ministerial posts in Asgård with Odin at the head. However, the cabinet meetings only thinly disguise the fact that Odin's rule is highly authoritarian, and he discusses none of his decisions with his fellow gods. The inefficiency of the system in Asgård is shown by the fact that the roles of the gods duplicate each other, with Tor and Tyr both war gods, and Frigg, Frej and Freja [Freyja] all gods of love.

### **ODIN - THE DICTATOR**

The figure of Odin - in his Big Brother role - looms over events in *Ragnarok*. The picture of Odin one gets from the literary sources is of a powerful and treacherous god who inspired fear rather than love or respect (Ellis Davidson, 1964), and Sørensen's Odin maintains this tradition.

The principal description of Odin in *Ragnarok* comes in the second chapter, "Krigsguder og kærlighedsguder" [Gods of War and Gods of Love]. "Odin, overguden, var ældst" [Odin, the chief god, was the oldest] we are told:

Han kunne huske alt hvad der var sket og han vidste alt hvad der ville ske. Han havde drukket af visdommens kilde, inden den tørrede ud, og havde i tidernes morgen givet sit ene øje i pant for alverdens visdom. Men med sit ene øje så han mere end alle andre. (p 11)

[He could remember everything that had ever happened and he knew everything that was going to happen. He had drunk from the spring of wisdom before it dried up, and at the dawn of time he had pledged an eye in exchange for all the wisdom in the world. But with his one eye he could see more than all the others.]

*Ragnarok's* Odin is a shadowy figure; when he ventures into Midgård he often travels incognito in a big cloak and a floppy hat to avoid being recognised. His surveillance of events is also aided by his view from the look-out tower, Lidskjálv [Hlidskjalf], from where he spies not only on the giants, but also on his fellow gods, and his ravens Huginn [Hugin] and Muginn [Munin] act as spies, eavesdropping on the gods and reporting back to Odin.

The only advice Odin takes from the other gods is apparently from the Norns, three female characters with the role of directing the fates of the humans, although there is no mention of him doing so in the novel. While he discusses none of his decisions with the other gods, he is ultimately dependent on the other gods' continued and unquestioning tolerance of him as a leader, on the dwarf weapon makers, and on the human army to protect him against the increasingly impending attack by the giants.

Odin's position is maintained by the belief that he is omnipotent. However, despite his supposed vision, it is the image of his lost eye which best seems to reflect the way he is blinded by his megalomania: and Odin's ambition and isolation are two of the main factors that bring about Ragnarok.



One of the features of Odin's reputed wisdom is his reticence. When he does speak it tends to be in the form of cryptic statements. When the younger gods ask his advice his stock reply is:

En vis kan spørge og selv svare, kald ham ellers ikke vis. (p 33)  
[A wise man can himself provide the answer to what he asks. Otherwise, call him not wise.]

Thus he effectively gives them no advice at all. This is both wise - he manages to avoid revealing the true superficiality of his wisdom, and foolish because it leads to the younger gods acting independently of him and each other.

Odin's isolation is increased by his decision that all the gods should live separately. This policy is apparently designed to prevent a plot against him, in practice it makes it harder to keep track of events. Despite his supposed omnipotence, and his view from the tower, Odin's literal absence from the ground-level means that he is not in touch with what is happening in the world of the gods. For example when Loke [Loki], whose role in the novel is apparently that of a double agent between the various camps, suggests that Skade choose her husband from the gods by deciding which pair of feet she prefers, we hear that:

Odin ville aldrig have tilladt den slags, men han sad oppe på Lidskjalv og overskuede verdenssituationen. (p 30)  
[Odin would have never permitted such a thing, but he was sitting up in Hlidskjalf taking stock of the world situation.]

It is apparent that Odin has broken his word on numerous occasions (he has reneged on an ancient pact with the giants, and he also breaks his oath to Freja that half the war-dead will go to her), however only Loke questions the motives and consistency

of Odin's rule. He sees through the enigmatic exterior and plants doubts in the mind of Balder who begins to wonder why, if Odin knows the future, he is doing nothing to prevent Ragnarok:

Han siger at alle guder kun skal have én vilje, hans egen. Men han selv har ikke én vilje, han har to. Han vil ikke krig med jætterne, for han ved at han taber den, og derfor får han Tor imod sig. Han vil ikke fred med jætterne, for han ved at han mister sin magt over guder og mennesker, hvis der ikke er krig. Han har to viljer, men kun ét ønske: at bevare sin magt, om så hele verden går til grunde. (p 101)

[He says that all the gods should be of one mind - his own; although he himself is not of one mind - but of two. He doesn't want a war with the giants because he knows he would lose it, and so he has turned Thor against him. He doesn't want peace with the giants, because he knows that without war he would lose his power over gods and men. He is in two minds but has only one desire: to retain his power even if the whole world should perish.]

Loke's comments mirror Balder's thoughts. The god of justice already seems to know that Odin's determination to maintain his personal power over-rides all other considerations, even to the extreme of all-out Ragnarok. Despite this he feels compelled to talk to his father about his dreams, and Odin wins his trust by telling his son that he will abdicate his power, making Balder leader and therefore in a position to make peace with the giants, something Odin's pride will not allow and the only action which could avert Ragnarok.

Odin's action allows him to avoid a potential coup, and Balder's (un)timely death avoids him having to abdicate. Although the gods accuse Loke of engineering Balder's death, there are a number of factors in *Ragnarok* that point to the possibility that it is Odin who arranges it. Of all creatures, Odin is alone in refusing to swear not to harm Balder when Balder's mother Frigg makes all living things, except the mistletoe, swear not to harm him. Furthermore, the mistletoe which makes the arrow

*Frigg:*

Where were you, when the whole world was weeping for  
Balder? You weren't by any chance disguised as an old  
woman who wept dry tears over his death?]

This passage is a clear allusion to the Eddic poem *Lokasenna* [The Insolence of Loki],  
in which the gods trade insults, for instance:

Loki said:

"Frigg, would you like to find out more  
of the wonders I can work?  
I can boast that you won't see Balder  
henceforth in any hall?

Freja said:

"Loki, you're mad, when you make known  
the evil deeds you've done!  
Frigg can see what the future holds,  
she just doesn't say so."

Loki said:

"Be quiet, Freja! That you're not faultless  
I have plain proof:  
all the elves and Æsir assembled here  
have had you for a whore."

(*Elder Edda*, 1991: 77)

Although Sørensen refers to the supposed amorous encounter between Frigg and  
Odin's two brothers Vile and Ve ("[De havde] taget hans kone, begge to" (p 123)  
[[They] seized his wife too, both of them], he steers away from the trading of extreme  
sexual insults that characterises *Lokasenna*, and makes what is an effective admission  
of guilt in the Eddic poem a defence of Loke's innocence.

## LOKE - PEACE MAKER OR AGENT PROVOCATEUR?

Snorri leaves his readers in no doubt that it is Loki who is responsible for Hoder's killing of Balder, and Sørensen's rehabilitation of Loke is his single greatest departure from a traditional reading of the myths. Writing of his sources for *Ragnarok*, Sørensen states that:

Jeg blev hos Oehlenschläger især fascineret af Loke og hans mellemstilling, men jeg, som interesserer mig for mellemstillinger i denne primitivt opdelte verden, kom i tvivl om det rimelige i at gøre ham til skurken. Da det er kampen mellem guder og jætter, der fører til ragnarok, er det så givet at Loke, der både er gud og jätte og som derfor hverken kan svigte guderne eller jætterne, er den store forræder? Er det ikke en primitiv læsemåde uden videre at tage parti for aserne, guderne, som ubestrideligt er de aggressive i forhold til jætterne, og at anse jætterne for fjender, blot fordi aserne angriber dem?

(Sørensen, 1983: 118-119)

[When studying Oehlenschläger, I became fascinated by Loke and his middle-position, but I, who am interested in middle-positions in this primitive, divided world, came to doubt if it was reasonable to make him the scoundrel. Since it is the conflict between gods and giants that brings about Ragnarok, is it so clear that Loke, who is both god and giant and who can therefore betray neither the gods or the giants, is the great traitor? Isn't it a primitive reading just to take the Aesers' side, the gods, who undeniably are the aggressors in relation to the giants, and to see the giants as enemies, simply because the Aeser attack them?]

The importance Sørensen places on his revision of the portrayal of the figure of Loke is again made clear in his afterword to the English translation of *Ragnarok* where he writes:

Loki is the most original figure in Norse mythology (...) and has no parallels elsewhere -though it is worth noting that he shares the same fate as that of the Greek Prometheus. To begin with, Loki may simply have been a trickster and become demonized during the course of time. In the *Younger Edda* it is he who instigates the death of Balder, although there is reason to believe that he had originally had nothing to do with the Balder myth. Presumably in their conception of Balder and Loki the *Eddas* were already influenced by Christian

moral dualism, and this became even more pronounced during the Romantic era. (Sørensen, 1989: 122)

*Ragnarok's* Loke is "hverken-eller" [neither-nor] and described as neither good nor bad and:

hverken as eller van og hverken lys eller mørk, - han var oprindelig jætte, og det kunne stadig mærkes, selv om det var så længe siden han var gået over til guderne, at ingen huskede det, undtagen naturligvis Odin selv. Mens guderne ellers anså jætterne for meget dummere end de selv, havde de svært med at hamle op med Loke. Han kunne også noget som de ikke kunne, men som nogle jætter kunne: skifte skikkelse og gøre sig til forskellige dyr, ja han kunne endda skabe andre om, og de andre var lidt bange for ham. Men guderne benyttede sig af Lokes forvandlingsevner og sendte ham somme tider over til jætterne for at udspionere i skikkelse af en fugl. (p 14)

[Loki was neither As nor Van and neither dark nor fair - he had originally been a frost giant, and that was still noticeable, even though it was such a long time since he had gone over to the gods that no one remembered it, except of course Odin himself. Whereas the gods usually regarded the giants as much stupider than themselves, the gods were scarcely a match for Loki. Besides, Loki could do something they could not, although some of the giants could. He could change his shape, and turn himself - and others too - into various animals; and so the gods were a little afraid of him. But they made use of Loki's shape-changing talents and sometimes sent him out to spy on the giants in the guise of a bird.]

As neither one thing nor the other, Loke falls between the two camps, and the gods suspect that Loke is also spying on them on behalf of the giants. Although this is not confirmed, he appears in the form of a flea on Balder on a number of occasions, and is only observed when he reappears as himself.

The gods make their suspicions of Loke clear. After their visit to the giant Udgård-Loke [Utgard-Loki], Tor asks Loke pointedly who Udgård-Loke is, implying a connection between the two. Despite their lack of trust, the gods remain dependent

on Loke to get them out of the difficult situations that arise. Loke capitalises on this, and asks several times:

Hvad ville I gøre uden mig? (p 43)

[What would you do without me?]

While he is of constant assistance to the gods, Loke seems to trigger a number of the crises himself. For example, although he rescues Ydun after she and her apples are abducted, she has only left the orchard in the first place on his suggestion. Later, when the gods make an agreement with a giant to build a defensive wall around Asgård, Loke avoids the gods having to honour their agreement by taking the form of a mare and seducing the giant Hrugner's horse. Without his horse the giant is unable to fulfil the terms of what the gods thought was an impossible contract (the terms of which were, incidentally, suggested by Loke). The loss of Frej's sword in the wooing of his giantess, Gerda, is also precipitated through Loke's actions as intermediary, and the loss of Tyr's hand when the wolf Fenris is bound, can also be linked to suspicions that it was Loke who first introduced the wolf to Asgård.

Balder, however, feels that Loke is made a scapegoat, and that his efforts to keep the peace go unappreciated:

Balder var (...) flov på gudernes vegne og følte at Loke var bedre end sit rygte: han fik skyld for alt og aldrig tak for noget. (pp 93-94)

[Balder was (...) embarrassed on behalf of the gods and felt that Loke was better than he was reputed to be: he always got the blame and never any thanks.]

The relationship between Loke and Balder is apparently close: of all the gods it is Balder that Loke confides in regarding his view of the world situation. There is also suggestion of sexual tension between them. When Balder first has bad dreams Loke asks, almost flirtatiously, whether they were about him, and we are told that after his dream Balder sees everything differently:

Da han mødte Loke, mærkede han også at han følte noget for ham, som han ikke før havde følt, men han vidste ikke hvad. (p 44)  
 [When he met Loki he became aware of feeling something for him he had never felt before - though he didn't know what it was.]

One of the final conversations between Balder and Loke concerns Loke's love for him:

- Jeg tror du hader guderne, sagde Balder: jeg tror ikke du elsker menneskene. Måske elsker du jætterne.  
 - Nej, sagde Loke: jeg elsker dig.  
 Balder stirrede på Loke:  
 - Det siger de jo allesammen, mumlede han.  
 - Det er også sandt, sagde Loke. (p 110)  
 ['I think you hate the gods,' said Balder. 'I don't think you love human beings. Perhaps you love the giants.'  
 'No,' said Loki. 'I love you.'  
 Balder stared at Loki:  
 That's what they all say,' he muttered.  
 'It's also the truth,' said Loki.]

Loke's inherent ambiguity extends to his physical sex. As mentioned above, he is an androgynous figure able to change at will both between species and between male and female. Loke's role as "hverken-eller" (or as Niels Thomsen suggests "både-og" [both-and] (Thomsen, 1983)) god or giant leaves him as an outsider who fits neither into the world of the gods, nor the world of the giants.



Just as it is clear that the gods distrust him, the giants also feel he is a traitor:

da jeg i tidens morgen fulgte Odin til Asgård, var det som jætternes talsmand. Det var et led i den gamle pagt mellem aser og jætter, som jætterne har holdt, men som aserne har brudt. Jætterne føler at jeg har forrådt dem, og de har mistet tålmodigheden - med mig, med jer. Men hvis det ikke havde været for mig, havde de mistet den for længe siden.

(p 103)

['Ages ago, when I accompanied Odin to Asgard, it was as spokesman for the giants. It was part of the old covenant between the Aesir and the giants, which the giants have kept but which the Aesir have broken. The giants feel that I have betrayed them, and they have lost patience -with me, and with all of you. But if it hadn't been for me they'd have lost it long ago.']

Loke in his attempt to compromise can satisfy neither side. He makes a final offer to the gods:

Jeg kan gøre jeres fjender mindre: skabe ormen og ulven om med det gode, som I ikke kan fælde med det onde. (p 127)

[I could reduce the power of your enemies. You can not destroy the serpent and the wolf with evil, for evil breeds evil; but I could transform them with goodness.]

When this is rejected - apparently the gods do not want enemies they can not defeat - he is mercilessly pursued from Asgård.

Loke is made a scapegoat by the gods, and in his attempt to escape he uses his skills of transformation first as a fly, and then as a salmon before he is finally caught and bound in a cave where the gods place a venom-dripping serpent above him. The extent of the division within Asgård is made clear by the fact that it is Freja who presumably against Odin's wishes, is seen holding a bowl above Loke's head to prevent the poison dripping on him (a role Snorri attributes to Loki's wife Sigyn).

Despite Sørensen's assertion of Loke's innocence, it is possible to read (as a number of critics have) into the text that it is Loke who is responsible for Balder's death. If this view is taken, it is of ironic interest that the net with which Loke is caught is of his own making.

The suggestion is made in the text that people may have believed that Loke might have been responsible for Balder's death, and may well have been the woman Tokki [Thokk], who is the only creature who fails to cry for Balder thus condemning him to remain in Hel's realm. Additional circumstantial evidence comes from, among other things, that it is Loke who during the first game is telling Høder what is taking place, and Loke who suggests the second game in front of the people (Odin is apparently opposed to this), and Loke who disappears after Balder's death.

The circumstances surrounding responsibility for Balder's death are never made entirely explicit in the text and the ambiguity this produces adds to the plot's intrigue, and on one level makes the tale a murder mystery.

### **LOKE AS DEVIL: BALDER AS CHRIST**

Although Sørensen does not lay the blame on Loke's shoulders as such, he does place him in the role of "tempter" (even down to the naming of a chapter "Loke frister Balder" [Loke Tempts Balder]). His likeness with Mefisto (with his ability to change form) is a further parallel with the devil, and historically the ambivalent Loki's reputation was dented by comparison with the devil in the late Viking age (Ellis Davidson, 1964). In *Ragnarok*, the giants can also be seen to be portrayed as demons by a number of the gods, particularly by Odin. In contrast, the clear similarity

between Jesus and Balder is one of the elements in the extant medieval literary sources that may indicate Christian influence upon them. Both Jesus and Balder are destined to die, both are the sons of the highest god, and both return from the dead.

Loke's suggestion to Balder that he should take power has clear parallels to the temptation of Jesus in the Bible, and a number of critics have pointed to the verses in *Matthew* 4 (Barfoed, 1982; Lundgreen-Nielsen, 1984):

The devil took him next to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in their glory. 9 'All these', he said, 'I will give you, if you will only fall down and do me homage.' 10 But Jesus said, 'Out of my sight, Satan! Scripture says, "You shall do homage to the Lord your God and worship him alone."<sup>3</sup>

However, *Matthew* describes how the devil presents Jesus with three temptations, the second of which is to prove he is Son of God by throwing himself off the parapet of the temple:

6 'If you are the Son of God,' he said, 'throw yourself down; for the scripture says, "He will put his angels in charge of you, and they will support you in their arms, for fear you should strike your foot against a stone."' 7 Jesus answered him, 'Scripture also says, "You are not to put the Lord your God to the test."'

While Jesus refuses to give into the temptation to defy the laws of nature, Balder takes part in the game enacted in front of the humans. In succumbing to the temptation to prove the extent to which he is loved, and the extent to which he is exempt from physical harm, Balder can be seen to succumb to a similar temptation to that which Christ resists in the Bible.

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<sup>3</sup> All biblical quotations are taken from the *Revised English Bible*, 1989.

## BALDER'S FEAR

The central characters in *Ragnarok* each have a fatal flaw; we have seen how Odin's hunger for power contributes to the build up to Ragnarok, and that Loke's "hverken- eller" nature hampers his attempts to avert the crisis. Balder's prime weakness is his overwhelming and disabling fear which seems to paralyse him. He notices the similarities to his dreams when Tyr loses one arm, and Frey loses his sword but tells no-one:

Den drøm røbede Balder ikke (...) Drømmen om gudernes, om verdens undergang blev ved med at komme igen. Hvem kunne han betro sig til - som ville tro ham?

Hvis drømmens syner kun var formet af hans egen skræk, var han et ynkeligt skrog blandt guder at han drømte således, og han skammede sig over det.

Men hvis drømmens syner var sande, var han et ynkeligt skrog, fordi han ikke turde røbe dem. (pp 49-50)

[This dream Balder did not reveal ... But the dream about the downfall of the gods - of the world - kept on returning. In whom could he confide? Who would believe him?

If the visions he saw in his dream were simply created by his own terror, he wasn't much of a god if he had such dreams, and he felt ashamed.

But if the visions were true, he wasn't much of a god if he didn't dare tell anyone.]

In the afterword to the English translation, Sørensen describes the danger of Balder's fear:

In his fear of evil the good Balder may be especially vulnerable to it - perhaps that is humanism's essential problem? (Sørensen, 1989: 122)

Balder's fear is transparent: Loke says "Du er så lys at man kan se lige gennem dig" ['You are so pale and fair that one can see right through you'](p 50), Odin sees his

fear as well, saying:

- Vidløs mand (...) våge om natten og ængster sig for alt. (p 108)
- ['Witless man ... to keep vigil all night, worrying about everything.']

It is also possible to read the text with Balder as traitor (Barfoed, 1982). When Loke first puts Odin's treachery to him he suggests that the thoughts had already occurred to Balder, and Balder does not deny that this is the case. Loke and Balder also discuss trust, and Loke asks if Balder trusts him:

- Stoler du på mig?
- Jeg ved det ikke, sagde Balder, som sandt var.
- Men jeg stoler på dig. Det vil ikke sige så meget, for det gør de jo allesammen, selv om de ikke retter sig efter dig. Men jeg stoler ikke på nogen af de andre aser, og det gør du heller ikke. (p 103)

['Do you trust me?']

'I don't know,' said Balder - which was perfectly true.

'But I trust you. That's not saying much, because they all do - even if they won't take your advice. But I don't trust any of the other Aesir, and you don't either.']

It is clear that Balder's angst is such that he trusts no-one. Loke points out that by failing to act on his suspicions, Balder is betraying those humans who believe in him. Yet when Balder declares that he is not a traitor, he is referring to treachery towards his father, and rather than act independently, he goes and discusses his thoughts with Odin who knows he has been talking to Loke. Loke, in turn, knows he has been to his father and comes to Balder in the form of a flea:<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The first time Loke appears in the form of a flea he bites Balder, and this is reminiscent of John Donne's poem "The Flea" (1633), where the mixing of blood in the flea has sexual connotations. The third verse of Donne's poem where the poet berates his lover for killing the flea has particular resonance in the context of *Ragnarok*: "Cruel and sudden, hast thou since/Purpled thy nail in blood

Om aftenen havde Balder igen en loppe på sig. Han kunne ikke lade være med at slå efter den. Loke så ond ud:

- Du har været hos Odin.

- Du har taget fejl af ham, sagde Balder.

- Bare jeg ikke har taget fejl af dig, sagde Loke. (p 113)

[In the evening Balder had a flea on him again. He couldn't help hitting out at it. Loki gave him a dirty look:

'You have been speaking to Odin.'

'You are wrong about him,' said Balder.

'If only I'm not wrong about you,' said Loki.]

Balder decides where his loyalty lies (note that this is not the first time Loke appears in this guise, and that by hitting out at the flea he effectively tries to kill Loke) and it is possible that, like Odin, the thought of power colours his judgement. This is the last conversation between the two, and Balder is killed soon after.

## RESPONSIBILITY FOR RAGNAROK

Although the interplay between Odin, Loke and Balder can be seen to be central to Balder's death and to Ragnarok, the other gods also ultimately bear a measure of responsibility for the crisis that leads to the end of the world.

Although Odin's apparently totalitarian rule is designed to keep control of events, it becomes progressively clear that he is more interested in maintaining his personal power than in the preservation of peace. All the gods appear to know, and dislike, the way in which Odin treats them dictatorially (for instance in "Frejs kærlighed" [Freyr's Love] after Frej has gone up Lidskalf, he and his sister whisper about what he has

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of innocence?/Wherein could this flea guilty be,/Except in that drop which it sucked from thee?"

seen so that the ravens will not hear). Despite their knowledge the gods fail to act to change the situation - perhaps being as aware as Odin of the fragility of the gods' supremacy, or perhaps being unaware of the full extent of their weaknesses, and Frej's shock when he climbs Lidskalf and sees the strength and numbers of the giants in Udgård indicates that the latter might be the case.

Irritated by the excessive restrictions Odin places on them (he eventually forbids the gods to leave Asgård), the other gods begin to act independently of each other and of Odin, thinking of their immediate desires, rather than the wider, long-term consequences. Frej's determination to marry Gerda, for instance, means he fails to consider the wider implications of his decision to marry her and disregards the consequences of the giving his sword as a dowry. Frej sees the loss of the sword simply in terms of his annoyance with Odin's restrictions, and not in the context of the wider conflict with the giants:

Frej betænkte sig. Sværdet var jo ikke kun hans sværd. Men han betænkte sig ikke længe. Når Odin forbød han at forlade Asgård, så måtte han selv tage følgerne. (p 64)

[Freyr thought it over. The sword belonged not only to him but to all the gods. But he didn't hesitate for long. If Odin had forbidden him to leave Asgard, then Odin must take the consequences.]

His impulsive and ill-considered surrendering of the sword has serious consequences. Although the giants do not use the sword against the gods (possibly because they do not need the gods' weapons), the growing conflict between the gods is exacerbated by his action: the cohesion of the gods is disintegrating, and only Frej's family, Loke and Balder attend Frej's wedding. In addition, the fact that Frej has appeared to make peace with the giants means that Tor thinks they are giving the wrong impression of



the gods to the giants, and with this excuse he performs further inflammatory actions against the giants. The loss of Frej's sword has serious consequences on a personal level too: the final image of Frej we have in the Ragnarok passage is that "Frej står og fægter med armene mod tårnhøje jætter" (p 133)[Freyr fences in vain with the towering giants].

Similarly, when Freja makes an agreement with Odin so that half the dead warriors will be sent to her because sending all the dead warriors to Valhal [Valhalla] is too militaristic (in "Krigsguder og kærlighedsguder" [Gods of War and Gods of Love]), her "make love not war" ideals backfire because she fails to appreciate that the allure of being sent to Freja after death will hardly serve to make the humans less war-like. At the other extreme Tor is driven by his blind hatred of the giants which leads him to make provocative attacks - of which the numerically superior giants eventually tire.

### **THE IRONY OF THE FALLIBLE GODS**

The ultimate irony of the novel is that the apparently all-powerful gods are unable to halt, or prevent, the destruction that occurs. The impression is of gods who are incapable of using the vast wisdom they supposedly have: they are fallible gods whose mistakes lead to catastrophe. In *Ragnarok*, the effectiveness of the milder gods of love (whose absence from the world removes their influence from the humans) is far outweighed by the gods of war who interfere in the human world to make the humans more war-like.

Sørensen's gods are dependent not only on the dwarfs and humans to provide protection for them, their continued elevated position is also dependent on the giants

choosing not to attack them. In reality the giants are so much more powerful than the gods that all preparations for war on the part of the gods are futile. The role of the gods is further weakened by the way in which the gods seem particularly ill-suited to their tasks: Freja (as Frigg points out) is an unmarried love goddess, Balder patently fails to see that justice is done, and Tor, while undeniably war-like, is too ill-disciplined in his attacks on the giants to have any tactical chance of holding them at bay.

Equally, Odin lacks the ability to maintain either his power, or the position of the gods. He is either not just or his insight is not as good as he claims:

"hvis Odin vidste at *det* var enden, hvorfor gjorde han da ikke noget for at afværge den? Hvorfor lod han blot ulven vokse som en voksende fare?

Men hvis han *ikke* vidste det... Så vidste Odin ikke alt, og hvad var han så for en gud?" (p 50-51)

[if Odin knew that the end was like this, why did he do nothing to avert it? Why did he simply let the wolf grow - like a growing danger?

But if he *didn't* know ... then Odin didn't know everything, and what kind of a god was he then?]

This questioning of Odin's role raises the issue of just how far one can trust, or believe in, a supposedly almighty, all-seeing god who fails to prevent evil and disaster.

Taken in the broadest sense the gods can be seen to represent political leaders, or the upper echelons of society in general. As such we can see that the competence, relevance and motives of the ruling elite in society is being questioned.

## THE IMPOTENT GODS

In addition to being politically inept, the gods are physically impotent: it is suggested that their inability to have children is connected to their consumption of Ydun's apples which they eat to keep youthful (in "Ydun og hendes æbler" [Idun and Her Apples]). The apples reverse the ageing process (Tor eats copious amounts before setting off in drag in Freja's stead to "marry" Trym) and if we take the physical characteristics of the gods (as with Loke) to represent personality traits, then we can conclude that the gods to some extent lack maturity. That this might be the case is indicated by the reaction of Balder and Tor to Odin's cryptic remark "Møder du ondt, så mærk det som ondt"(p 33) [If you meet with evil, then know it as such]. This is the extent of Odin's advice on Fenris the wolf when he first appears, and, rather than coming to an independent decision, the brothers waste time discussing what Odin might have meant. Balder's apparent reluctance to act independently is also shown by his going to talk to Odin about Ragnarok.

The theme of sexuality throughout the work is linked generally to forbidden desire. The suggestion of sexual tension between Loke and Balder has already been discussed and the other suggestions of forbidden desire are introduced subtly into the plot, and Balder's palpable relief at not being chosen as the giantess Skade's husband can be interpreted in this vein. Forbidden love is an element of Frej's love for Gerda, who is out of bounds as a giantess, and his feelings have incestuous overtones as he tells Freja that: "Hun ligner dig" [She looks like you], a possible allusion to Loki's accusation in *Lokasenna* that the brother and sister were found in flagrante. In addition there is clearly distance between Frigg and Odin, and Frigg appears jealous of Freja who Odin has apparently "comforted" in the past.

## LANGUAGE, IRONY AND ALLEGORY

Although *Ragnarok* clearly has a serious message, the work contains a great deal of humour, as Snorri's *Prose Edda* also does. In Sørensen's tale the humour supports the allegorical message and directs the reader to the social comment within the novels.

*Ragnarok's* Odin's pronouncement on the wolf quoted above, could be seen to be a self-condemnation, as he is both singularly unable to recognise evil for what it is, and possibly an embodiment of evil himself. The comment is reminiscent of political rhetoric (sound-bite politics), and links to the image of Odin as a dictator figure.

Anachronistic use of language also points towards the relevance of the tales to modern society. Although the world of the gods is clearly set in the mythical past, Odin finishes a meeting of the council of the gods in the manner of a board director: "Mødet er hævet" [The meeting is hereby closed] (p 19), following a discussion between the gods, and this brings us sharply forward from a fantasy world inhabited by gods to our own modern society.

On the whole the language Sørensen uses is fairly colloquial in style, and the pithiness and repetitiveness owes a great deal to oral tradition and influences such as Hans Christian Andersen, for example the simplicity and humorous repartee in the meeting mentioned above:

- Jeg mener som Freja, sagde Frej.
- Det gør jeg også, sagde Njord.
- Jeg mener som Tor, sagde Sif.
- Jeg mener som jeg selv, sagde Tor.
- Det gør jeg også, sagde Tyr." (p 18)
- ['I agree with Freyja,' said Freyr.
- 'So do I,' said Njord.
- 'I agree with Thor,' said Sif.

'I agree with myself,' said Thor.  
'So do I,' said Tyr.]

The use of the form of dialogue used in *Lokasenna* has already been mentioned, and a further example of a similar break in style comes with the passage describing Balder's dream of Ragnarok, and it is repeated at the end of the novel. The description of Ragnarok begins:

Alting ryster, alt rystes løs, i kroppen, i verden.  
En ulv så stor at den kan gabe fra jord til himmel sluger solen.  
En orm så stor at den fylder hele havet skyder op over land og  
spruder gift og ild, så jorden begynder at brænde.  
Asketræet i Asgård slås løs af rystelserne og stikkes i brand, dets  
ildgrene breder sig ud over hele verden og rager stjernerne ned .....  
(p 48; p 132)

[Everything shakes, everything shakes apart.  
A wolf so big that its gaping jaws can bridge earth and heaven is  
swallowing the sun.  
A serpent so huge that it fills the entire ocean ranges up over land,  
spewing venom and fire, so the earth starts to burn.  
In Asgard the ash tree is torn loose by quakes and set on fire, its blazing  
branches spreading all over the world and tearing down the stars...]

This is clearly reminiscent of the description of Ragnarok in *Völuspá*, and the change in style sets the scene apart and the increased sense of doom is heightened by the repetition. However, whereas the final verses of *Völuspá* describe a period of renewal, Sørensen's novel concludes with the chaos and finality of Ragnarok, and this is entirely consistent with its role as an allegory of a cold war situation culminating in a nuclear-style holocaust.

## STRUCTURE AND TIME

The form of the novel is closely linked to the underlying concept of time by which events are carried along, and this can be seen to reflect the world view present in the work. Rather than adopt a mythical, cyclical approach to time and structure, the narrative progresses in a linear fashion, and the end, as mentioned above, is implied from the very beginning, the lines of conflict are defined from the start and the individual episodes lead remorselessly to the finale of Ragnarok which is not just the downfall of the gods, but the end of the world.

Sørensen's approach to the mythological material is to streamline the stories and characters, and he creates a unity/consistency between the myths which puts Snorri to shame. For example Balder's role as god of justice is attributed in literary sources to his son Forseti, and it is Frej's servant Skirnir who the *Eddas* describe as proposing to the giantess Gerda and not Loki. As well as making the cast list more manageable, this ploy serves to back up the plot as a whole: that Balder is the god of justice makes his death more powerful symbolically in the context of a political allegory, and sending Loke to woo Gerda rather than Skirnir strengthens Loke's ambiguous role of arbitrator between the gods and the giants. Overall in *Ragnarok* the effect of the large number of characters serves to back up the idea of collective guilt. The manner in which the gods all work independently of each other and with different aims is emphasised and the disaster this leads to can be seen to be inevitable.



## THE AUTHOR'S RESPONSIBILITY FOR PRESERVING MYTH

In his review of *Ragnarok*, Flemming Lundgreen-Nielsen writes that:

Bogen er endnu et eksempel i litteraturens historie på, at hver tidsalder finder sit og genfinder sig selv i gudelæren.

Villy Sørensen holder sig forholdsvis tæt til kilderne, navnlig Snorres Edda, men ved umærkelige små drejninger får han i de femten korte kapitler kendte myter til at sige noget nyt.

(Lundgreen-Nielsen, 1984: 167)

[The book is yet another example in the History of literature that each age finds itself and finds itself anew in the stories about the gods.

Villy Sørensen keeps fairly close to the sources, namely Snorri's *Edda*, but by unremarkable small twists he manages in the fifteen short chapters to make well-know myths say something new.]

While Lundgreen-Nielsen sees Sørensen's work as part of an historical tradition of the re-use of mythology, others have been more critical of his deviation from the traditional interpretation of sources. His streamlining of the myths is one point of controversy surrounding his re-telling of the stories of the Norse gods. By re-evaluating the roles of the individual characters, and reapportioning the blame for the downfall of the gods, he depicts the actions and stories of the gods from the point of view of the end result - Ragnarok. In his bleak portrayal of Ragnarok as inevitable and final, Sørensen departs from the Eddic and Grundtvigian tradition which can be seen to be along the lines of "life triumphs in spite of everything" (Esbjørn Holck, 1986).

Danish educationalist Dorthe Esbjørn Holck sees a danger in his concentration on Ragnarok:

Min fornemmelse er, at i det øjeblik de nordiske myter opfattes som sammenfattet i Ragnarok, så er deres betydning forbi. Det samme gælder de kristne myter, når de bruges entydigt moraliserende, pegende mod Dommedag. Hvis der ikke for den, der fortæller eller hører historierne, er den dimension med, der indeholder håbet om og troen på livet som en

mulighed, så mister de deres appel og dør.

(Esbjørn Holck, 1986: 38-39)

[My impression is, that the minute the Nordic myths are perceived as being summarised in Ragnarok, then their meaning has passed. The same is true of the Christian myths, when they are used solely for moralising, pointing at Doomsday. If there isn't an element of hope of and belief in life as a possibility, both for those telling and those hearing the stories, then the stories lose their appeal and die.]

The idea that an author's reworking of the myths can in itself cause them to *die* places an author in a powerful and responsible position as guardian of the culture. However, it is an ill-founded view, as it implies that myth has a perceptible and constant *essence*.

A similar underlying belief to that expressed by Esbjørn Holck can be seen to be underlying the criticism of Sørensen's work by Niels Thomsen in *Højskolebladet*. The Grundtvigian view of Norse myth Thomsen takes in his article is only thinly masked by his repeated references back to Snorri. His view appears to be that the myths in question have a fixed, and absolute meaning. Thomsen says of *Ragnarok* that "den tilsyneladende enkelhed er bedrag" (1983: 154) [the apparent simplicity is a deceit]. He refuses to accept Loke's rehabilitation, and is broadly critical of Sørensen's approach:

Centrum i det er, at den gamle grundforståelse af den nordiske mytologi og af forholdet mellem aser og jætter som en kamp mellem godt og ondt -den kommer Villy Sørensen om ved at gøre Loke langt mere omgængelig og ved at gøre først og fremmest Tor og Tyr, men i grunden alle aserne, bortset fra Balder og Høder, til umodne yankee-narre. Godt og ondt er afskrevet. Forestillingerne er ovenikøbet skadelige. Det er Tors dumme selvforståelse som det godes vogter, der fremskynder konfrontationen mellem guder og jætter.

(Thomsen, 1983: 154)

[The crux of it is, that the old basic understanding of the Nordic mythology and of the relationship between the Aser and the Giants as a fight between good and evil - Villy Sørensen gets around it by making

Loke far more sociable and by first and foremost making Tor and Tyr, but basically all the Aser, except from Balder and Høder, into immature Yankee fools. Good and evil are discarded. The depictions are in addition damaging. It is Tor's stupid self-perception as the guardian of the good, which propels the confrontation between the gods and giants forward.]

In a reply to the criticisms aimed at *Ragnarok* Sørensen defends the work as a work of fiction, and argues that as such it makes no sense to apply the theories of myth created by Grundtvig, particularly the dualistic interpretation of the gods as good, and the giants as evil, which is not borne out by the actions of the gods in the earlier sources:

Grundtvigianerne fastholder (...) at aserne er *de* gode, selv når de øver ondt (massemord, tortur, løftebrud). (Sørensen, 1983: 230)

[The Grundtvigians maintain (...) that the Aser are *the* good guys, even when they perpetrate evil (mass murder, torture, breaking of promises).]

Sørensen further likens the message of the novel to the Christian principle that one should love one's enemy, and presents Ragnarok not as an abstract mythological concept but as "en truende virkelighed" (Sørensen, 1983: 230) [a threatening reality].

Sørensen has never claimed that his story *is* the myth, and a large part of the criticism seems to be based on the critic's belief that readers, without the critical perception and knowledge they themselves possess, will accept Sørensen's retelling as the myths themselves. When discussing the suitability of the stories in *Ragnarok* for use in schools, Esbjørn Holck hits on a crucial point:

De må i alle tilfælde fastholdes som *fortalt af nogen*. Det kan være Møller eller Saxo, Grønbech eller Ole Pedersen (...) Ingen myter, heller

ikke de nordiske, er faldet ned fra himlen som universalnøgler til livet.

(Esbjørn Holck, 1986: 39-40)

[It must in any case be stressed that they are *told by someone*. It can be Møller or Saxo, Grønbech or Ole Pedersen (...) No myths, including the Nordic myths, have fallen down from the sky as universal keys to life.]

The body of Norse mythology upon which authors can draw can by no means be viewed as pure in origin, or unsullied or incorruptible. Any criticism aimed at Sørensen for his adaptation of the material to suit his concerns probably has more to do with the challenge it represents to Grundtvig than to his "challenge" to mythology.

If we foreground the fact that *all* our literary sources of Norse mythology come from the rewriting and reinterpretation of myth by individual writers, it becomes impossible to argue for an absolute view of myth. Once one moves away from a fixed idea of myth, one releases the author from the responsibility of preserving the (non-existent) proto-myth, and also demands a move away from a position in which the reader uncritically accepts earlier readings of myth. It is this critical reading of myth that lies at the heart of myth revision.

## CHAPTER THREE: SEXUAL RAGNAROK

### TORGNY LINDGREN'S *KÄRLEKSGUDEN FRÖ*

Rugner älskade Freja, de älskade med varandra, han var jätte och hon var gud. Hon var stor men han var mångdubbelt större, för hennes skull borde de ha avstått men de kunde inte, det jättelika var väldigare än det gudomliga. (Lindgren, 1986: 139)

[Rugner loved Freja, they made love to each other, he was a giant and she was a god. She was big but he was many times larger, for her sake they should have refrained but they couldn't, the giantlike was greater than the godly.]

So begins the tenth story in Torgny Lindgren's *Legender* [Legends], a collection of fantastic and allegorical stories encompassing subjects as diverse as football players and biblical characters. The tale about the goddess Freja [Frejya] and the giant Rugner is the only one in the collection drawing characters from Norse mythology. The emphasis placed on the sexual and burlesque aspects of the mythological material in the short story is carried through in Lindgren's longer mythologically based work - *Kärlekguden Frö* [The god of love Frö/Freyr] and this reflects his approach to the Old Norse source material which is very different to that taken by Villy Sørensen.

### TORGNY LINDGREN

Like Sørensen in Denmark, Torgny Lindgren is a prominent writer in his generation in Sweden. Born in 1938 in the rural Norsjö region in the north of Sweden, Lindgren grew up surrounded by stories. The oral traditions passed on through the tales he heard from his family and neighbours as a child are reflected in his literary approach, which is also characterised linguistically by the style of the region's dialect. The simplicity of folk-tales and bible stories comes through in the tone, and subject matter of many of his works.

Lindgren's literary debut came early with a poem published in a literary journal - *Perspektiv* [Perspective] - at the age of thirteen. His first collection of poems was published in 1965 - *Plåtsax - hjärtats instrument* [Plate shears - the instrument of the heart], and his prose debut came with a collection of short stories, *Skolbagateller medan jag försökte skriva till mina överordnade* [School Trivia. While Attempting to Write to My Superiors], in 1972. His earlier work is overtly political: the stories in *Skolbagateller*, for example, contain clear criticism of the impersonal school system (Hinchliffe, 1985). In the 1980's, the influences of his childhood and his interest in religion became more dominant stylistic and thematic features of his work.

However, within the legendary settings of the tales in *Legender*, which typify much of his later work such as *Ljuset* [Light] (1987) and *Bat Seba* [Bathsheba] (1985), lies an often biting critique of human society in general, and many of his tales expose the dangers of bigotry and petty-mindedness.

Religion - in the broadest sense - is a recurrent theme in Lindgren's work, and the short story featuring Rugner and Freja can be seen to pose questions about the role and character of a god. Freja's imperfections are demonstrated by the three demands she makes of her lover Rugner: that he believe in her as a god; that he build her an altar; and that he sacrifice their son to her. Rugner agrees to the first two demands, but he refuses to sacrifice the child and, destroying her altar, dies crushed by the weight of the stone.



Rugner questions whether Freja is indeed a god:

Du har en vårta just under naveln, sade Rugner. Kan du då vara gud?  
 Det är en gudomlig vårta.  
 Är du en ond gud eller en god gud?  
 Jag är kärlekens gud.  
 Ja, det vet jag, sade Rugner. Men är du ond eller god?  
 Då log hon bara, därom sade hon ingenting: ond eller god.  
 (Lindgren, 1986: 140)

["You have a wart just below your navel," said Rugner. "Are you sure you're a god then?"

"It's a godly wart."

"Are you an evil god, or a good god?"

"I am the god of love."

"Yes, I know that," said Rugner. "But are you evil or good?"

At that she just laughed, she said nothing: evil or good.]

Echoing themes in Sørensen's *Ragnarok*, the question of the role and nature of a god present in the story from *Legender* are expanded upon in the novel *Kärleksguden Frö*.

### KÄRLEKSGUDEN FRÖ - THE UNAUTHORISED BIOGRAPHY

A year prior to the publication of *Kärleksguden Frö* in 1988, Torgny Lindgren published *Ljuset*. Sune Askaner's review of *Kärleksguden Frö* in *Sydöstran* describes the earlier book, *Ljuset*, which is steeped in legendary themes, as a step towards "den mytens värld" [the world of the myths] which is the setting for the story about the god Frö (Askaner, 1988).

The god of love portrayed in *Kärleksguden Frö* is Freja's male counterpart - her brother Frö. The book is described as a "levnadsteckning" [biography] and takes the reader through a number of significant events in Frö's life. The emphasis on his role

as a god of love and fertility is shown by the use of the name "Frö" (literally "seed") rather than the more commonly used Swedish form "Frej" or "Fröj".

It is clear from the outset that the aspect of Norse myth that is emphasized, and to some extent exaggerated, is the burlesque and the bodily. In *Kärleksguden Frö*, Lindgren draws heavily on the more grotesque and sexual elements suggested in the *Eddas* and plays on inconsistencies within the mythological sources with a resulting carnivalesque tale of the gods.

While the allegorical world of the gods portrayed by Sørensen in *Ragnarök* contains a strong element of fantasy - with transformations, and transportations taken in their stride by characters and readers alike - the book's formal and cohesive structure imposes a sense of realism. In *Kärleksguden Frö*, however, fantasy extends beyond the credible and the plot sometimes takes bizarre and abrupt twists.

Lindgren can be seen to be drawn towards the elements closest to the oral traditions with which his work is often linked, and these emerge in the exaggerated features with which his characters are endowed. In the construction of the work he takes the Eddic sources as a starting point and builds his idiosyncratic version loosely upon them, and this led to the accusation of Lindgren by another reviewer of having a parasitical approach towards the myths (Jonsson, 1988). His story often seems based upon curious details usually regarded as insignificant. For example, he picks up on the mention in *Grímnismál*<sup>1</sup> of the gift of Alvheim to Frö/Freyr as a "toothgift", and from

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<sup>1</sup> In Terry's translation, the obscure verse concerned is omitted, but Hollander's 1928 translation gives Verse V as: "On Ydal's plains Ull hath reared him/his hall timbered on high./For Frey's tooth-fee was fashioned of yore/Alf-home, as gift by the gods." Her foot-note adds that "The 'tooth-fee' is a gift to an infant when he cuts his first tooth" (*The Poetic Edda*, 1928).

this he builds an opening scene reminiscent of a christening scene in a fairy tale such as *Sleeping Beauty*.

The opening chapter sees a number of the gods watching the emergence of Frö's strange, phallic tooth. This emphasizes from the start the overtly sexual, phallic aspect of the god seen in figurative portrayals from the Viking age (see figure XVI, page 108). The emergence of Frö's remarkable tooth is described in detail:

Den var inte blott en gudomlig tand. Nej, den hade samma färg som hud, ansiktets hud eller handens, och avslutades upptill av en mjukt rundad ansvällning, en blå-röd hjässa eller krona eller knopp, som tycktes ha blottas genom att tandens hudliknande hölje lösgjorts och glidit nedåt och samlats i en veckrik ring eller krage. (p 8<sup>2</sup>)

[It was not merely a godly tooth. No, it had the same colour as skin, the skin on the face or the hand, and ended at the upper end with a soft rounded swelling, a blue-red top, or crown or knob which seemed to have been revealed by the tooth's skinlike cover loosening and sliding down and gathering in a crumpled/pleated ring or collar.]

The reader, with foreknowledge of Frö's role, is immediately able to see the symbolic significance of the tooth. He/she can therefore be said to have the foresight that the gods - who do not immediately recognize the true significance of Frö's tooth - initially lack.

The sexuality of the gods is elaborated upon at some length and can be seen to be an intrinsic and dominant part of their nature, as the depiction of Frö's tooth suggests. By stressing, and exaggerating, this particular aspect of the Norse myths the portrayal of the gods becomes very different to that of Villy Sørensen. Whereas Sørensen's Freja

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<sup>2</sup> Page numbers refer to paperback edition, published Stockholm: Pan, 1990.

## Illustration XVI

Frey's phallic portrayal in this Viking bronze statuette from Lunda, Sweden is reflected in Torgny Lindgren's *Frö*, and in Peter Dahl's illustrations for *Kärleksguden Frö*.



is idealised and omits the sexual excesses implied in the Eddic sources (Lundgreen-Flemming compares Sørensen's portrayal to Oehlenschläger and Grundtvig's (1984)), Lindgren's Fröja is literally insatiable, and she makes sexual advances on her brother Frö, and indulges in sexual frolics with Heimdall.

A cradle scene could be seen to epitomize childhood innocence, but as well as Frö's emerging tooth, descriptions of the origin of a number of the gods are given in the opening pages, and these build on fragments from the Eddic sources. The births of several named gods are described, for instance, the description of the birth of the god Tor [Thor] which emphasizes the symbolism of his origins, not made explicit in Snorri's Edda where Tor's mother "Iord"/Jord [Earth] is portrayed as a goddess:<sup>3</sup>

Guden Tor, han som sänder blixterna och åskregnen och med sin skräckinjagande hammare bekämpar ondskan och döden, har är född ur Jord, kvinnan som är jorden och som var Odens första hustru. Oden borrhade helt enkelt sitt spjut i henne så att hon blev havande och födde, Tor trängde fram ur en av hennes klyftor. (p 18)

[The god Tor, who sends the lightning and the thundering rain and fights evil and death with his awe-inspiring hammer, was born from the Earth, the woman who is the earth and who was Oden's first wife. Oden simply bored his spear into her so that she became pregnant and gave birth, Tor pushed forth out of one of her chasms.]

The origin of another god, Heimdall, is recounted by Lindgren at greater length, and in more graphic detail. Nothing specific is said of Heimdall's birth in the *Poetic Edda*. In a passage about his role as the watchman of the gods, however, Snorri writes in *Gylfaginning*:

Nine maidens bore him as their son, all of them sisters.  
(Snorri, 1987: 25)

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<sup>3</sup> Gylfaginning: "The earth was his [Odin's] daughter and his wife. Out of her he begot the first of his sons, that is Asa-Thor". (Snorri, 1987: 13)

and repeats the reference in *Skaldskaparmál* to Heimdall as the "son of nine mothers" (Snorri, 1987: 75, 76, 77). Lindgren expands on these brief references and builds a graphic account of Heimdall's conception and birth:

De umgicks i all vänskaplighet, de nio, de arbetade alla vid världskvarnen som åstadkommer ebb och flod i haven och som mal fram all sanden och mullen på jorden och som bringar himlavalvet och stjärnorna att vrida sig. Ibland tog de rast och kelade litet med varandra, lekfullt och barnsligt. Men en gång råkade de kela mer och ivrigare än de ursprungligen hade avsett. De blev varma och svettiga och slet av sig kläderna och började gnugga och knåda varandra på de mest oväntade sätt, det var en ren tillfällighet och ett missöde, och till sist låg de på marken och gned sina sköten mot varandra alla nio (...) och gnidningen åstadkom en sådan hetta att där blev rök och gnistor, och plötsligt sprang Heimdall fram ur dem, ur alla nio skötena på en gång. (pp 19-20)

[They were together in a friendly manner, the nine of them, they all worked at the world mill which produces ebb and flow in the ocean, and which grinds out all the sand and soil on the earth, and which causes the arch of the heavens and the stars to turn. Every now and again they took a rest and cuddled each other a bit, playfully and like children. But on one occasion they just happened to tickle more and more keenly than they had originally intended. They became warm and sweaty and they took off their clothes and began to rub and knead each other in the most unexpected way. It was pure coincidence and an accident, and finally they lay on the ground and all nine rubbed their crotches against each other (...) the kneading produced such a heat that there was smoke and sparks and suddenly Heimdall sprang forth from them, out of all nine crotches at once.]

Like Villy Sørensen's *Ragnarok, Kärleksguden Frö* was first published as an illustrated book, although subsequent editions were unillustrated, and the erotic nature of some of the prose passages is carried through into controversial Swedish artist Peter Dahl's illustrations (see illustration, page 111). In reviews of *Kärleksguden Frö* Dahl's pictures received almost as much coverage as the novel, and the two men worked together on the project and are credited jointly on the book's



## Illustration XVII

Peter Dahl's impressionistic illustrations for *Kärleksguden Frö* continue the themes of sexuality within Lindgren's text.



first edition cover. The pictures are clearly influenced by rock carvings, and at times they take on the appearance of psychiatrist's ink blot drawings which emphasises possible Freudian interpretations.

It is presumably this joint venture that prompted the inclusion of the theme of Art/Artist to the novel, one which never quite seems to be resolved, or particularly well absorbed into the mythical landscape, and the Alvhem to which the infant Frö is sent after the cradle scene, to be fostered by the sculptor Valand [Weland the smith] contains a peripheral artists' colony. The artist is thus portrayed as inhabiting the edge of paradise in the borderlands between gods and giants (a no-man's land making them 'neither-nor' figures in the same way as Villy Sørensen's Loke, and like Loke they ultimately side with the giants). The novel makes a dig at critics when the winner of a competition arranged by Loke [Loki] and judged by Frö is chosen for the beauty of the imperfections of his copies of Valand's own work.

The over emphatic language employed by Lindgren's narrator in the description of Alvhem serves to suggest that the surface meaning of the words is unreliable. For instance, the ironic narrator says of Alvhem that:

I Alvhem finns ingen synd och ingen ondska. (p 13)  
[In Alvhem there is no sin and no evil.]

This is clearly not the case as Valand's vengeful character bears out. The narrator's choice of incongruous words to describe people and places emphasises the irony, and he says further of Alvhem that it is

det mest fulländade och oklanderliga landskap som tänkas kan. (p 13)  
[the most perfect and flawless landscape which can be imagined.]

The implication is that it is neither perfect nor beyond reproach, and use of the word "oklanderlig" with regard to a landscape seems somewhat out of place, suggesting that the opposite is in fact the case.

*Kärleksguden Frö's* paradise is stifling and the narrator suggests that it was "ett misstag av Allmakten att låta kärlekens gud växa upp i lycksalighetens land" (p 14) [a mistake of the Almighty to allow the god of love to grow up in the land of happiness], and this point is stressed:

Man skulle alltså lika gärna kunna resa frågan om inte skapelsens och gudarnas och alla levande varelsers strävan efter måttfullhet och jämvikt bättre skulle tjänats av att exempelvis djävulen hade fått sin fostran i paradiset! (pp 14-15)

[One could therefore just as well raise the question as to whether creation and the gods' and all living beings' search for moderation and equality would not have been better served by, for example, the devil having been brought up in paradise!]

It is clear that the Alvhem in which Frö grows up is less than perfect, and the pleasures and idleness that characterise Frö's life in Alvhem become tedious:

tiden i lustgården kan te sig outhärdigt lång. Det ligger så att säga i sakens natur. Vad som randar förnöjelsen och sällheten med stråk av plåga är, enkelt uttryckt, tråkigheten på landsbygden. (p 35)

[Time in a garden of Eden can seem unbearably long. It is an element so to speak of the nature of the thing. That which touches pleasure and bliss with streaks of suffering is, simply put, boredom in the countryside.]

The portrayal of Alvhem as a paradise in which Frö wants for nothing, except a mother's love, raises the question of how far *material* wealth is of value in a child's

upbringing, particularly as Frö appears to have grown into little more than an indolent and self-indulgent creature when he returns to the bosom of his family - having grown tired of the pleasures offered by Alvhem.

Other characters are also portrayed in a less than favourable light. For example, despite his heavy drinking, we hear that "Oden blev aldrig berusad" (p 43) [Oden [Odin] never got drunk] while his appearance implies that he does. An earlier comment that

Allt Odens handlande präglades av beräkning och välmenande förutseende. (p 35)

[All Oden's actions were characterised by consideration and well intentioned prediction.]

is immediately modified/negated by the narrator who continues:

Dessvärre ska vi med tiden finna att han när det gällde Valand inte varit förutseende nog. Fast egentligen hade väl Oden förutsett även detta.  
(p 35)

[Unfortunately we shall with time discover that he, when it concerned Valand, was not far-sighted enough. Although actually Oden had even anticipated this.]

With the narrator inserting doubt as to the consistency of his own narration into the reader's mind, the reader starts to question the surface meaning of the words, and the irony serves almost to invert the meaning of language. In this way a new angle on the novel and the characters is opened, and the satirical aspect of the novel becomes clearer.

Inversion can also be seen to characterise Lindgren's approach to the fairy-tale elements present in *Kärleksguden Frö*. Whereas in a fairy tale the hero would be expected to succeed - overcoming obstacles and proving his worthy character - Frö as a hero fails decisively in the task he is set as a god falling at almost every hurdle. He is therefore an anti-hero rather than a hero.

The question of the competence and relevance of the gods in *Kärleksguden Frö* is linked to Christianity through a number of biblical allusions. As in *Ragnarok*, the parallel made by Lindgren is primarily through the use of loaded language. By describing Alvhem variously as paradise and hell, and by portraying Gullveig as the devil, Lindgren introduces Christian terminology into a work based on Norse mythology.

Although the use of Christian concepts could suggest that the satire is aimed in part at Christianity, the anachronistic use of Christian allusion seems to underline the satirical intent of the novel, rather than representing a direct attack on religion itself. Even so the question of the competence and relevance of gods in *Kärleksguden Frö* can be extended to all religions and to leaders generally (compare *Ragnarok* where the allegorical portrayal of the Norse gods forms an attack on modern political leadership style, see pages 91 - 93).

Frö's own role as a god is highlighted on his return home from Alvhem where he has grown bored. His sphere of responsibility is revealed to the gods by the monumental erection he experiences at the sight of the beautiful giantess Gärd [Gerd]. However, rather than set out to fulfil his mission and act to spread happiness/love to others, Frö

seeks his own satisfaction, and endeavours with the help of his servant Skirner [Skirnir] to woo Gärd.

The oral quality of the prose style in *Kärleksguden Frö* is at its strongest in the passages depicting the wooing of Gärd. Skirner's abrupt introduction is made comic, rather than merely a stylistic break:

Vi har inte sagt att Frö nu hade en tjänare. Han borde ha omnämnts tidigare så att han på ett naturligare sätt kunnat flyta in i handlingen. Här dyker han plötsligt upp. (p 64)

[We haven't mentioned that Frö had a servant. He should have been mentioned earlier so that he in a natural manner could flow into the plot. Now he suddenly just pops up.]

The object of Frö's desire, Gärd, seemingly aware of the oral tradition in which she is performing, makes it clear when offered eleven golden apples as a dowry, that she knows this is an inappropriate number for a character in a magical story:

Elva, sade hon. Elva är inte något heligt tal. (p 69)  
['Eleven,' she said. 'Eleven isn't a magic number.']

Gärd is eventually persuaded to marry Frö on the condition that he gives her a powerful giant-slaying sword made for him by Valand as a dowry. On a symbolic level it can be seen to disarm Frö personally, and the loss of the masculine symbol the sword represents is mirrored by the loss of his huge penis - of which only a stump remains after the honeymoon period is over. Emasculated, Frö literally loses his defining feature.

There seems to be no obstacle (apart from Gärd's initial unwillingness) to Frö's marriage to Gärd, and the differences between the gods and the giants are portrayed



as social and ethical. Of all the giants in the novel and in Frö's life it is Gärd's mother Gullveig rather than Gärd who is the most central, and Gärd herself retires to Alvhem and out of the story after the honeymoon. Frö's principal enemy, and a peripheral 'evil god-mother' figure in the cradle-scene, the marriage introduces her at greater length, and Gullveig is described as the devil. On one level this continues the religious/social critique but her role as devil mother-in-law raises challenging problems for a consistent and coherent reading of the novel.

### GULLVEIG - THE DEVIL MOTHER-IN-LAW

In his portrayal of Gullveig, Lindgren expands upon the description of the burning of Gullveig from *Völuspá*:

- 11     She remembers war,    the first in the world  
          Countless spears    were cast at Gulveig,  
          her body burned    in Odin's hall;  
          three times burned, three times born,  
          again and again,    yet even now alive.
  
  - 12     Witch was her name    in the halls that knew her,  
          a sorceress, casting    evil spells;  
          she used magic    to ensnare the mind,  
          a welcome friend    to wicked women.
- (*Elder Edda*, 1991: 2)

Lindgren's narrator relates how the devil woman Gullveig - evil and with a forked tongue - is repeatedly burnt by the gods:

Två gånger hade gudarna slaktat och bränt Gullveig, hon som var  
 djävulen själv, urdjävulen, trots att djävulen på sin höjd blir livad och  
 uppeldad av att förbrännas.(pp 36-37)  
 [The gods had slaughtered and burnt Gullveig twice, the woman who  
 was the devil herself, the archetypal devil, despite the fact that the devil  
 at the most got enlivened and inflamed by being burnt.]

Gullveig herself describes the giants not as demons but as atheists:

vi är gudsförnekare och ingenting annat. Det är ju inte dig personligen vi vill komma åt. Det är saken det gäller. Vid Frös lem, jag ska sannerligen göra allt som står i min makt för att hjälpa dig. (p 113)  
 [we're atheists - that's all. It's nothing personal really. It's to do with the cause. By Frö's organ, I swear I'll do everything in my power to help you.]

At first Gullveig plays an apparently pacifying role. Her initial role seems to bear this out and once in possession of Frö's sword

Gullveig gick till de andra jättarna med svärdet, och de hackade en djup klyfta i den eviga isen, dit ner sänkte de svärdet och de fyllde klyftan med vatten som snart frös till is. Det känns tryggt att ha ett sådant vapen och att ha det oåtkomligt. (p 87)  
 [Gullveig went to the other giants with the sword, and they hacked a deep cleft in the eternal ice, and buried the sword deep down in it, and they filled the chasm with water which soon froze and became ice. You feel safe having such a weapon and having it out of reach.]

The potential for the expansion of the theme of female led disarmament is abandoned, however, and by the end of the novel Gullveig is in possession of Valand's second and more destructive sword:

ett svärd som med några få raska snitt kan halshugga alla levande väsenden på jorden och i haven och i himlen, ja även det svärdet skulle med heder kunna bära namnet Ragnarök. (p 151)  
 [a sword which with a few quick incisions could chop the head off all living creatures on earth and in the sea and in the sky, indeed one would be justified in calling the sword Ragnarök.]

The character of Gullveig is contradictory and problematic. She is at once both a victim of the gods, and an aggressor who travels the world wreaking destruction. The narrator suggests that her character contains a degree of symbolism:

Hon är en sinnebild för allt ont som sker. I sin egenskap av tecken är hon skyldig till allt. Även om hon i sig själv, som person, är alldeles oskyldig. (p 154)

[She is a metaphor for all the evil that takes place. In her capacity as a symbol she is guilty of everything. Even if she herself, as a person, is completely innocent.]

The conflict between the god and the giantess/devil, however, is not a clear-cut battle between good and evil, or the eternal conflict between male and female, or between older and younger generation. The final scene of the novel sees Gullveig and Frö hurtling into orbit eternally linked by Frö's tooth which has become embedded into Gullveig's flesh locked in an unresolved, and irresolvable combat. The symbolism, if it is present, is of an irresolvable conflict on all levels of creation, and of an ever present and cyclical potential for disaster - Ragnarok.

### **SKRINER - THE 'JOURNEYMAN'**

Frö's relationship with his servant Skirner is less complex than that between the god and his mother-in-law, and the servant has to repeatedly come to the aid of his master while getting none of the limelight, and little thanks (compare discussion of Loke's role in *Ragnarok* above, pages 82 - 84). In addition to negotiating the terms for Frö's marriage, Skirner has to save the day, when Valand in a rage, following the competition arranged by Loke, conspires to have the god imprisoned in the giant Bele's [Beli's] prison and Gullveig arranges for Fröja to join him. Again Frö's role as a

god of love is spot-lighted and the absence of the two love gods coincides with an extended and particularly harsh period of winter - *fimbulvintern* - and the gods finally act to rescue Frö. Skirner is dispatched to rescue his imprisoned master and thus averts the impending arrival of Ragnarok. On Skirner's arrival, however, Frö seems altogether disinclined to be rescued, asking firstly why the gods should want him back, and secondly whether the giants will allow him to escape.

Skirner refuses to explain how he got to Bele's prison to rescue Frö and Fröja, saying it was:

På ett hemlighetsfullt sätt som kommer att beskrivas utförligt i berättelsen  
om mitt liv. (p 125)  
[In a secret way which will be described in depth in the story of my  
life.]

This relieves Lindgren of the task of having to explain how things come about. Frö's scorning of the suggestion that a servant like Skirner would have a biography written about him high-lights the tendency for biographies to be an exclusive, elitist literary form and also plays on the fact that while Frö is the god, it is Skirner who has an Eddic poem - *För Scírnis* [Skirnir's Journey] - dedicated to him.

## THE INCOMPETENT GODS

It is primarily after their rescue, with the subsequent passing of *fimbulvintern*, that Frö and Fröja actively engage in their roles as gods, and they intervene in the reproduction cycle to help creation on its way. The brother and sister divide the task of helping the plants and creatures of the world recover. This marks the most active part of Frö's working life, and appears initially to justify his position as a god. The

greatest moment in his life comes when he tells the last two remaining human beings the secret of reproduction which they have forgotten. Although we are told that "Av det mänskliga språkets alla ord hade han valt de enda rätta" [Of all the human language he had chosen the only correct words] (p 140), his explanation that "man gör det med pekfingret i navelgropen" (p 139) [you do it with the index finger in the tummy button] makes his greatest deed seem pathetically comic.

Oden explicitly tells Frö that the gods are not an essential part of creation and he tells Frö not to be unduly concerned about his tasks as a god because "Skapelsen är i stort sett fulländad" [Creation is generally complete/perfect] and has managed quite well in the past without him. These words sum up the situation portrayed in *Kärleksguden Frö*, and looking at the gods portrayed by Lindgren one sees a superfluous and indolent, self-indulgent class isolated from the rest of the world. The gods lack leadership and purpose, the chief god, Oden's "himmelens och jordens herre" who should fulfil this role seems more interested in decadent pleasures, and is far removed from Villy Sørensen's power mongering dictator Odin. Like his counterpart in *Ragnarok*, Oden reputedly has foreknowledge, but is apparently unable - or unwilling - to use this knowledge to change or influence the course of events. He consequently fails to prevent Frö and Fröja's imprisonment by the giant Bele. This tendency to make serious errors of judgement is also seen to have dire consequences, for instance the choice of Valand as foster-father to Frö.

One can conclude that it is a sheer coincidence that fimbulvintern occurs during Frö and Fröja's absence. Despite Frö's apparent saving of the human race his over zealousness in encouraging propagation and reproduction leads to excess and world crisis, threatening rather than aiding the planet's continued survival so that:

Naturens rike kommer i strid med sig självt. Det är en överflödets kris av ohyggliga mått, en nådens och välsignelsens syndaflod, en livets tygellösa och förryckta översvämning där begreppen födelse och död glider in i varandra och blir liktydiga och utbytbara.

(p 148-149)

[The realm of Nature comes into conflict with itself. A crisis of excess of immense proportions, a Flood of grace and blessing, an unrestrained and crazy deluge of life where the concepts of birth and death merge and become synonymous and interchangeable with each other.]

The fluidity that arises between life and death in Frö's world breaks down the distinguishing features of "existence" and is mirrored by a deconstruction of time in the novel.

## STRUCTURE, TIME, AND MEANING

In *Kärleksguden Frö*, time is described as cyclical reflecting ancient concepts of time to a greater extent than the linear beginning, middle and holocaust-like end in *Ragnarok*. The structure of the novel and the concept of time within the novel are linked, and the gods' understanding and experience of time is described at length by the narrator:

gudarnas tid är inte tid i vanlig mening, hos gudarna har inga begrepp sin vanliga mening, inte heller rummet är rum i vanliga mening, rummets och tidens summa som brukar benämnas Alltet har en sådan utsträckning att det lika gärna kan betraktas som Intet. Med tiden i vår inskränkta, mänskliga mening förhåller det sig också så att gudarna fullständigt har erövrat den och härskar över den, där gudarna inte är där sker ingenting, där finns ingenting annat än det stillastående tomrummet. Den gudomliga tiden bildar en liggande dubbelögla, gudarna föds visserligen och lever och åldras och dör, de färdas från vaggan til graven, men i ett kretslopp utan slut, deras tid förflyter men är oändlig. (p 6)



[the time of the gods isn't time in the normal sense, with the gods no concept has its normal sense, nor is space, space in the normal sense, space and time's sum which is usually referred to as Everything has a kind of extent that it could just as well be regarded as Nothing. With time in our narrow, human sense is it the case also that gods have completely conquered it and rule over it, there where there are no gods nothing happens, there is nothing other than the static empty space. The godly time forms a lying double loop, the gods are born and live and grow old and die, they go from the cradle to the grave, but in a cycle without end, their time passes but is eternal.]

While the opening cradle scene might suggest that the novel itself is going to progress along a linear/historical time plane, the idea of time as a recurring cycle of events is expanded with the novel's structure, and the story continues beyond the present. The narrative moves from the past into the future:

Då gick Frö till Oden.

Eller: då kommer Frö att gå till Oden. Här måste levnadsteckningen låta orden anta nya former när tid ska uttryckas. Dels därför att den är på väg in i det gåtfulla landskap som kallas framtiden. Men dels också för att den själv måste börja krökas och böjas så att den så småningom ska kunna vrida eller slingra sig in i det gudomliga livets liggande dubbelögla.

(pp 143-142)

[Then Frö went to Oden.

Or rather: then Frö will go to Oden. At this point the biography must be allowed to express time in another manner. Partly because it is now on the way into that mysterious landscape which is called the future. But partly also because it itself must begin to be bent and curve so that it bit by bit will be able to wind or twine itself into the holy life's lying double loop.]

Within this double-loop, Ragnarök is portrayed by Lindgren as a recurring element of the cycle of time, and the events described in the final pages mark one of many low points in the history of the world, with the *fimbulvintern* when Frö and Fröja are incarcerated in Bele's prison and the chaos Frö himself initiates both described in terms of "Ragnarök".

By placing the reader of the novel somewhere in the middle of Frö's life and continuing the narrative beyond this point, Lindgren creates a sense of time as something fluid, and at the same time as something physical. However, whereas in *Ragnarok* the end (of time as well as the world) is inevitable and clearly predicted, Lindgren's novel concludes by rejecting the possibility of making a clear prediction:

Och jordens undergång? Nå så nyckfull och oberäknelig och oförutsebar som den är kan den mycket väl komma att göra Frö och Gullveig sällskap tillbaka in i det himmelska kretsloppet. Och då vete gudarna var och när den härnäst dyker upp. (p 156)

[And the downfall of the world? Well something as arbitrary and unpredictable as that can just as well keep Frö and Gullveig company on their way back into the heavenly orbit. And the gods alone know where and when it will next pop up.]

Although one could argue that resisting messages is a message in itself, *Kärleksguden Frö* is perhaps an example of a work in which it is impossible to attempt to reach too clearly defined interpretations of the text as a whole. Olav Wiström writes in his newspaper review of the novel:

Det är frigörande att ta del av Torgny Lindgrens vackra och gäcksamdunga gammaltestamentliga bygdemålsprosa, som förressten lämpar sig bra för högläsning, men jag kan ändå inte lösriva mig från misstanken att undertexten rymmer minre än vad ironin utlovar. (Wiström, 1989)

[It is liberating to study Torgny Lindgren's beautiful and mockingly heavy Old Testament rural prose, which incidentally lends itself to reading aloud, but I can't get away from the suspicion that the sub-text contains less than the irony promises.]

Many elements of the novel - such as the controversial role of Gullveig and to some extent the discussion of art in connection to the character of Valand - are only partially developed and remain ultimately unresolved.

*Kärleksguden Frö* has many interesting and thought provoking features and the ironic tone mentioned by Wiström lends humour to the book and supports it where social-allegorical elements fail to be cohesive, and the allegorical aspects which are present (particularly relating to man's interference in the natural cycle/ destructiveness of the arms race etc.) are loosely connected, and it is Frö's phallus which is the central motif and theme of the novel.

Dorthe Esbjørn Holck has suggested that Sørensen's *Ragnarok* could have been written to trigger debate:

Er det debatindlæg i billedlig form? Eller er det en provokation, der som modspil skal fremtvinge fortællingerne om, hvordan det kunne ende godt.

(Esbjørn Holck, 1986: 36)

[Is it a debate piece in metaphorical form? Or is it a provocation which in return will compel the production of tales about how things could end happily.]

Whether or not it was intended as such, Lindgren's novel can be seen to answer Sørensen's earlier portrayal of the world of the gods - taking the more burlesque and bizarre aspects of the Eddic tales and emphasising the decadence of the gods/world leaders whose incompetence is largely irrelevant as the world is in spite of all interference (negative and positive) in a constant cycle of destruction and renewal.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RECLAIMING THE CAULDRON

### SVAVA JAKOBSDÓTTIR'S *GUNNLAÐAR SAGA*

The allegories by Sørensen and Lindgren described in the previous chapters present the Norse gods in a demythologized form: they are no longer historical/mythological characters but literary characters - devices through whose words and actions the authors' allegorical messages are conveyed. The approach of the authors discussed in the following two chapters is very different. For within the pages of the novels and in the minds of the central characters in *Gunnlaðar saga* [The Story about Gunnlod] by Icelandic Svava Jakobsdóttir, and *Ravn og due* [Raven and Dove] by Norwegian Vera Henriksen the mythological characters, while still clearly literary figures, contain (or regain) an element of their religious roots.

As we have seen, both Lindgren and Sørensen are revisionist in their presentation of the Norse myths - Lindgren demolishes Frö's character and reputation, and Sørensen rehabilitates Loke. Revision of myth is taken a step further in *Gunnlaðar saga* because Svava Jakobsdóttir's re-examination of the figure of Gunnlod reappropriates both the story of Gunnlod, and the voice of women in myth/culture. Academic Dianne Purkiss has described how women have historically been peripheral to the cultural and academic process of handing down myths, and defines the rewriting of myths by women as denoting:

participation in (...) historical processes and the struggle to alter gender asymmetries agreed upon for centuries by myth's disseminators. When feminists envisage that struggle, they often think of the rewriting or reinterpretation of individual stories: for example, by changing the focus of narrative from a male character, or by shifting the terms of the myth so that what was a 'negative' female role-model becomes a positive one.

(Purkiss 1992: 441)

The presentation of feminist revisionism by Purkiss primarily centres on the reception of Classical mythology, but her approach is also relevant with regard to Norse mythology as it is increasingly clear that interpretations of the Eddic texts have marginalized the female figures and also, on occasion, glossed over portrayals of violence towards women characters (Larrington, 1992).

As mentioned in the introductory section (see above, pages 12 - 25), the *Prose Edda* and the *Poetic Edda* are not always consistent, and it was such an inconsistency that led Svava Jakobsdóttir to write her novel *Gunnlaðar saga*<sup>1</sup> [The Story about Gunnlod] (1987) which challenges the story of how Odin stole the mead of inspiration from the giant Suttung's daughter, Gunnlod.

### SVAVA JAKOBSDÓTTIR

Svava Jakobsdóttir (b 1930) has had a career both as a writer of short stories, novels and plays, and as a socialist politician. She made her debut as a writer in 1965 with *Tólf komur* [Twelve women] - a collection of short stories. Characteristic of her work is the use of the fantastic (see definition of the fantastic and fantastic realism below, pp 134 - 135), which she feels to be a form more suited to representing 'inner experiences' than traditional realism or psychological realism (Jakobsdóttir, 1980). She has often expressed criticism of the American NATO presence in Iceland through her work, focusing largely on the lives of women.

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<sup>1</sup> Where I have quoted from the novel, it is from the Danish translation *Historien om Gunlød*, trans. by Preben Meulengracht Sørensen. Copenhagen: Rhodos, 1990. The main difference in form between this and the Icelandic edition is the chapter division, which is minimal in the Danish version. While there are no chapter numbering in the Icelandic edition either, each new chapter is given a new page.

In the 1980's she withdrew from active politics and concentrated on her writing. For *Gunnlaðar saga* she undertook academic 'detective' work to discover the true story about Gunnlod and her research was published in the Icelandic periodical *Skinir* (Jakobsdóttir, 1988). Her dissatisfaction with the view of Gunnlod presented by Snorri started in her childhood. Jakobsdóttir has described how, when she was at school, she instinctively felt that his version was incorrect:

Jeg visste av en eller annen grunn at det Snorre sa, var feil. Jeg ville ikke kunnet argumentere for denne følelsen da, men jeg fortsatte å tenke på Gunnlod.

Mange år senere begynte jeg å arbeide meg inn i mytologien for å finne ut hvem hun var, og da syntes jeg det var opplagt at Snorre har blandet ulike myter i fortellingen om Suttungs mjød. Han bruker *Hávamál* som utgangspunkt, men har rett og slett ikke kjent eller forstått myter og ritualet som beskrives i strofen om Gunnlod.

(Kristjánsdóttir, 1990: 24)

[I knew somehow that what Snorri said was wrong. I would not have been able to give arguments for this feeling then, but I continued to think about Gunnlod.

Many years later, I began to work my way in to the mythology to find out who she was, and then I thought it was clear that Snorri has mixed together different myths in the story about Suttung's mead. He uses *Hávamál* as a starting point, but he has simply not known, or understood, myths and the ritual which are described in the verses about Gunnlod.]

## THE STORY ABOUT GUNNLOD

Snorri's version in *Skaldskaparmál* relates how the giant Suttung came to have possession of the mead of poetic inspiration and puts it in the care of his daughter, Gunnlod. Odin sets out in disguise to get the mead back for the gods. He causes nine men working in the fields of Suttung's brother Baugi to quarrel and cut each other's throats and then offers to work for Baugi demanding only a drink of the mead as



Illustration XVIII.  
(Right) Late  
seventeenth  
century portrayal  
of Gunnlod and  
the giantess  
Thokki.



Illustration XIX.  
The Gundestrup  
cauldron from the  
first century BC  
probably with  
roots in Celtic  
religion  
(Bæksted), is one  
of Denmark's  
National  
Museum's  
greatest treasures,  
and can be seen  
to have provided  
inspiration for the  
plot of  
*Gunnlaðar saga*  
(below).



payment. Baugi agrees to this, but Suttung refuses to let Odin taste the mead. Odin, with the help of Baugi, bores a hole into the mountain where Suttung lives, and creeps in in the form of a serpent. Once inside the mountain, he sleeps three nights with Gunnlod, who lets him have three drinks of the mead. He empties all three vessels containing the mead, and flies back to Asgard in the form of an eagle.

The version in the *Poetic Edda*, in *Hávamál* verses 104 - 110, tells the story from a different angle. Odin describes his encounter with Gunnlod:

104 I sought the old giant, and when I saw him,  
       little I learned keeping still:  
 much I received for the many words  
       I spoke in Suttung's hall.

105 With a drill's teeth I cut my trail,  
       I gnawed right through the rock;  
 over and under me wound the giants' ways -  
       a perilous path I traveled.

106 From her gilded chair Gunnlod gave me  
       a cup of costly mead;  
 an ill reward she had in return  
       for her quick kindness,  
       for her heavy heart.

107 From that good bargain I gained a lot,  
       now I've no lack of wisdom;  
 the magic drink, the mead of poetry,  
       left with the Æsir's lord.

108 I don't believe I could have come back  
       from the giant's court  
 were it not for Gunnlod, that good woman  
       who lay in my arms for love.

- 109 The next day the frost-giants found  
the High One in his hall;  
they asked if Odin were with the Æsir  
or if Suttung had slain him.
- 110 Odin didn't honor his oath on the ring-  
what good is any pledge he gives?  
He stole the mead from Suttung's feast,  
and Gunnlod grieves.

(*Elder Edda*, 1991: 25-26)

The passage from *Hávamál* as a whole portrays Gunnlod as a maiden betrayed (Odin is said to have gained the mead by betrayal and cunning), and the verses have overtones of ritual (a golden chair is mentioned, and Odin has made and broken a 'ring oath'). The last two verses mark a shift in tone away from Odin's point of view, and the portrayal of Gunnlod/Gunlød in *Gunnlaðar saga* can be seen to build on this shift in perspective. Jakobsdóttir bases her story about Gunnlod on her re-interpretation of the verses in *Hávamál*, and combines the story of the stealing of Suttung's mead with the Celtic tradition of the female 'sovereignty' figure, metaphorically married to the king as a symbol of his marriage to the land. In her article detailing the background for her revision of Gunnlod's story, she links Odin's action to various Indo-European legends about the stealing of cauldrons and inspirational meads (Jakobsdóttir, 1988). Her novel gives an account of how the balance between male and female, king and goddess was destroyed as the prehistoric Earth Goddess was pushed aside by an aggressive male supremacy. The novel demonstrates how greed and ambition create inequality and imbalance, both culturally and environmentally, and how this results in violence, destruction and social/spiritual fragmentation.

like her, access to the holiest place, the Goddess's residence. But only chosen, anointed women can carry out the daily rituals that guarantee life's and nature's cyclical and eternal rhythm. The Goddess herself is not personified as woman, but represents rather the female powers, fertility, life, the matter/principle of life. The initiation of the king means that a new king subjects himself to the Goddess's law and makes an oath to govern his kingdom without violence, war and therefore untimely death.]

The bronze-age society can thus be seen to be a natural balance - it is neither a matriarchy nor a patriarchy but combines all aspects of life and creation. This balance is destroyed, however, when following the initiation ceremony, Odin breaks his oath to the goddess and steals the sacred cauldron from which the mead is served. Claiming to have been given absolute power, he overturns her power and begins to extract iron from the earth in order to produce weapons. The conflict marks the onset of the Iron Age and brings with it the collapse of world order, as predicted in *Völuspá*. The cataclysmic events in the past are reflected in the present by the accident at Chernobyl which occurs while the mother is in Copenhagen, and both can be seen to represent a social/environmental Ragnarok.

In court Dis is declared mentally unfit, and mother and daughter return to Iceland. The story ends where it starts, on the plane back to Iceland. Here there is an unexpected twist in the tale: it emerges that the mother has taken events into her own hands and, as a political protest, has stolen the cauldron from the courtroom having decided that the truth of Gunlød's story should not be condemned to the psychiatric ward.

## THE FANTASTIC, MAGICAL REALISM AND SUSPENSION OF DISBELIEF

The plot of *Gunnlaðar saga* combines the realistic and the fantastic in a way that parallels the South American 'magical realism' which gives the mystical non-rational elements of life the same status as the rational, and which:

reflects the ontological uncertainty of our times (...) and challenge[s] the traditional perception of an ordered and coherent world which underpins realist fiction's pretensions to reproduce reality in literature. A conventional linear plot might be abandoned, the stance of the traditional, omniscient narrator might be shunned, or, at the opposite extreme, the narrator might flaunt his or her presence, the novel might reflect at length on the nature of fiction, or a novel might accord the same status to the world of the mind as that of the physical and social world. But what is most likely to strike the reader in magical realism is the bizarre nature of the events and stories that are included in the plots, many of them calling upon and exploiting myth.

(Peck and Coyle, 1993: 129-130)

Jakobsdóttir argues that exclusion of the fantastic limits our understanding of reality:

Min dragning mot det fantastiske betyr at jeg aldri har følt at en gjennomrasjonalisert virkelighetsoppfatning er særlig fornuftig eller i samsvar med virkeligheten. (Kristjánsdóttir, 1990: 30)

[My attraction to the fantastic means that I have never felt that a rationalized understanding of reality is particularly sensible or corresponds with reality.]

In his study on the fantastic in literature, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (1970) [published in English in 1973 as *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*] Tzvetan Todorov defines the fantastic:

The fantastic requires the fulfilment of three conditions. First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be

experienced by a character; thus the reader's role is so to speak entrusted to a character, and at the same time the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work - in the case of naive reading, the actual reader identifies himself with the character. Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as 'poetic' interpretations. (Todorov, 1973: 33)

Todorov describes how the fantastic leads the reader to a state of almost believing and that successful fantasy has to be almost realistic, and it is clear the reader's attitude to the fantastic elements has significance for the success of fantastic literature.

In *Gunnlaðar saga* the mytho-historic world described by Dis has a straightforward authenticity which takes one beyond the question of whether Dis' transportation is mental (schizophrenic) or physical (supernatural). The reader is skilfully manoeuvred into the position of 'hesitation' by the intricately woven narrative as the reader follows the mother's train of thought. The fantastic element of *Gunnlaðar saga* is introduced gradually, and its acceptance is facilitated by the mother's initial scepticism which anticipates and thereby lessens the scepticism of the reader, who is led into identifying with the confiding mother.

The first fifty pages or so of *Gunnlaðar saga* appear realistic, and this gives the narrative a solid basis of credibility in which to introduce fantastic events. The story is introduced largely by the mother. Although the narrator is telling the story retrospectively, the problem of her own subjectivity and eventual belief in her daughter's story is overcome by her relating the story as she saw it at the time. She describes how others view events, without explicitly revealing her own final position. Thus we learn that the two men guarding Dis on the plane believe her to be mad, and that at the outset she thinks her daughter is lying. Initially, the mother presents herself



as a perfectly rational human being whose cynicism towards Dis' story easily equals that of the reader. One assumes initially that the mother shares the opinions she relates as she condemns her daughter's story quite forcibly, and here the boundary between Dis/Gunlød and the mother is clearly defined. Her reaction to Dis' version of events places her firmly in the rational world:

Dis sagde jeg forsigtigt, du behøver ikke at finde på det her for min skyld. Du kan sige mig sandheden. (p 30)  
 ["Dis," I said carefully. "You don't need to invent all this for my sake. You can tell me the truth."]

But gradually the split becomes harder to define. When the mother is in the lawyer's office she says:

jeg [er] kommet i en tilstand hvor jeg er som to mennesker. (p 36)  
 [I have reached a state where I am like two people.]

This statement is both realistic - reflecting the sensation of feeling detached from reality - and mystical - reflecting the experience of physically becoming two people. However, it is only really with hindsight that one sees the signs of the mystical story coming through in the mother's experiences in the opening sequences of the book.

The fact that the narrator so obviously found her daughter's actions absurd anticipates, and thereby lessens, the reader's natural response that the scenario is somewhat extreme. Once the reader's confidence has been gained, s/he is drawn into the story in the same way as the mother herself. Although she is apparently only humouring Dis in order to discover her motives for inventing the story, the mother soon begins to question the actions and motives of the supposedly make-believe mythological characters, for instance she asks: "Hvor ville Gunlød føre hende hen?" (p

43)[Where did Gunlod want to take her?]. The reader, deceived by the apparent objectivity which runs through the novel, is persuaded by the mother's gradual acceptance of Dis' story, and her conclusions about the state of the world.

As it becomes increasingly clear that the mother is growing convinced of the truth of Dis' story, other seemingly sceptical characters also present information or opinions themselves. The distance this provides facilitates the acceptance of this information, and Todorov's 'hesitation'. The mother's ostensibly rhetorical question:

Troede hun virkelig på at hendes blik alene rummede en trolddom der var så stærk at den kunne knuse glas? (p 22)

[Did she really believe that her look alone contained a magic that was so strong that it could break glass?]

is later expanded on by the psychiatrist, who asks the mother what she knows about poltergeists. Thus the author is able, through an apparently cynical character (it is after all through the psychiatrist's testimony that Dis is declared mentally unstable), to introduce a phenomenon which is both unexplained and widely believed. This reminder of the complexity and incomprehensible nature of life makes the reader more likely to be open to the possibility of some sort of 'emotional memory' which can come to the surface

hvis tiden er forsvundet (...) hvis alle de ydre begivenheder i årtusinderne er kunstig tid mens erkendelsen strømmer i blodet.

(Kristjánsdóttir 1990a: 194)

[if time has vanished (...) if all the outer events in millennia are artificial time while recognition flows in the blood.]

The novel's version of Gunnlod's story is presented in a similar manner. The Bronze Age characters, all with mythological names, are clearly drawn and their mythical

roles become linked to human spiritual experience and shamanism. The Bronze Age society and landscape is portrayed realistically. The initial portrayal of the landscape is of it laid waste, and this comes before the descriptions of the utopian pastoral society which precede the catastrophe adding a further element of doom and suspense to the events leading up to 'Ragnarok' on the Bronze Age plane.

On the contemporary plane, the repeated question of "Hvem er hun egentlig denne Gunlød?" (p 90) [Who is she really, this Gunlod] makes the reader more open to the question of her identity. The mother initially finds the question annoying (increasing her apparent objectivity), and it is Anna, the bar-owner with whom the mother stays, who prompts the unwilling mother to investigate the literary sources of the story about Gunlød, and this adds reference to the intertextual process involved in the creation of the novel as a whole. The narrator's thoughts about her library research allows the author to introduce doubt about Snorri's version of the story and she remarks about the *Prose Edda*:

Pludselig synes jeg at det gule omslag er så kedeligt. Og fordi det bare er en genfortælling. (p 108)  
[Suddenly I think that the yellow cover is so boring. And also because it is just a re-telling.]

It is also Anna, and not the mother or Dis, who presents the reader with the cynically humorous solution to the nature of Odin's crime with her comment that "På de bedre værtshuse stjæler gæsterne glassene"(p 184) [In the better guest houses the guests steal the glasses]. The theory that it is the cauldron that Odin has stolen, not merely the mead, is therefore distanced from the emotionally involved mother.

As the book progresses, the sharp division between the initial rational realism of the mother and Dis' fantasy becomes blurred, and the interruptions in the Dis/Gunlød passages at the start of the novel, which emphasize the mother's initial role as an objective, rational observer become fewer, and as they fail to penetrate her trance, they are used to emphasize points to the reader. It is therefore her mother, and not Dis, who comments on the fact that the tunnel/chamber Dis/Gunlød enters at the end of the story is the same as at the beginning. The boundary between the two characters' stories also grows hazy, and it becomes increasingly difficult to tell whether the story is being told by Dis or her mother. This serves both to increase the drama and blur the boundary between the two characters, and at times it almost appears as if the mother has also taken on Gunlød's character, an idea borne out by her stealing the cauldron at the end.

This connection between the two worlds is accentuated by reflected images. These draw attention to the process of the mother being drawn into Dis' world. For instance the image of Dis looking into the mirror in the museum, and the image of the mother looking into the mirror in the hotel, link the two strands of the story, as does parallel use of mythological imagery which will be discussed below. Ambiguous linking of passages adds to the fluidity the text, for example, a passage in which Dis/Gunlød is the first person beginning:

Jeg drømte varselsdrømme om den kommende dag. Vågnede sent.  
(p 91)

[I dreamt warning dreams about the coming day. Awoke late.]

links thematically to the subsequent passage, in which it emerges that the mother is the first person narrator, which begins:

Det er morgen. Der hænger et mørke over mig (...) Jeg ville ikke kunne svare på om jeg havde sovet godt eller dårligt. (p 100)  
 [It's morning. A darkness hangs over me (...) I wouldn't have been able to say whether I had slept well or badly.]

This movement from a strong division between the two planes of the story, to a more fluid structure in which the narrators merge is one of the ways in which Jakobsdóttir links the realistic with the fantastic.

The greater part of the novel is taken up by the mother's story on the contemporary plane, and these passages are generally longer than the Dis/Gunlød passages. As the story progresses the length of the passages set in the Bronze Age tends to be longer. This allows the reader time to become accustomed to the idea of a central character travelling back in time before immersing him/her in Dis' story, and gives a less abrupt movement towards the fantastic than if these passages had been longer from the start.

Towards the end of the novel, however, the contemporary story becomes dominant once more, and overall it is granted significantly more space. As the novel progresses the character of the mother develops: her attitude towards her daughter and towards society in general moves from a firmly rational position to an irrational/emotional one. Dis' character is portrayed as a personification of light, and as such has no depth, and during the novel her character undergoes no development. Her mother, in contrast, has a multitude of shadows in her character and life and can even be seen to fear light - choosing to sit in the dark in the hotel room, and preferring the dingy bar to the brightness of the hotel restaurant. Despite the novel's title, and the significance the

narrator herself places on the Dis/Gunlød story, the central character of the novel is arguably the mother herself.

The main role of the events surrounding Dis' arrest, and the Dis/Gunlød story - ostensibly most central to the plot - can be viewed as a backdrop and essential catalyst to the development of the mother's character.

### **THE MOTHER - NARRATOR AND SUBJECT**

The change in the mother's attitude towards Dis' story marks a development in her attitudes in general. The physical journey is paralleled by a voyage of personal discovery, and she moves from a blinkered, conservative view of life to being open, not only to her daughter's story, but also to new ideas and experiences.

In this respect the technique of the narrator telling the story, without immediately revealing her end position, gives the reader insight into the radical change in the narrator's character. Her experiences in Denmark lead her for the first time to question the morality of the established social order - an order from which she has hitherto benefitted greatly. At first she is portrayed as snobbish - a glamorous and successful partner in the company she and her husband own. She is very concerned about appearances and believes that money will build the 'gyldne bro' (p 31) [gilded bridge] she feels necessary to buy Dis out of trouble. As her attitudes change her increasing disregard for appearances is reflected in the way she no longer seems so concerned by how she dresses.



As the story progresses, the reader is taken through the motions of the narrator's uneven movement from the rational/affluent/male world she has previously allied herself with in Iceland, to an irrational/female experience in a run-down bar in Copenhagen, where she discovers a different, and broader way of perceiving truth and a different world view. She goes from being served (in the high-class hotel where she stays on her arrival in Denmark), to serving (in the bar). Her spiritual purification is reflected in the nature of her servitude - she washes the table cloths in Anna's bar, and later bathes her swollen feet. The foot-bath she gives Anna has biblical connotations, and the laundry process is described by the narrator in ritualistic terms:

Samtidig ved jeg at denne vask ikke er et offer til Anna men dog en slags forsoning eller forligstilbud. (p 125)

[At the same time I know that this wash is not a sacrifice to Anna, but more a kind of atonement or gesture of conciliation]

Her recognition of the fallacy of social status is a vital step towards her growing realization of her responsibility for events - both on a personal and on a general level.

As the mother's attitude to the patriarchal system changes so does her attitude to the representatives of this system. On her first meeting with the prison guard she refers to the "faderlig mildhed over hans ansigt" (p 18) [fatherly mildness across his face] and says

Han ser på mig med medfølelse og forstår straks at Dis er vores fælles bekymring og at jeg ikke vil fare op med beskyldninger mod fangevogter eller politi for anholdelse, dårlig behandling eller andet af den slags som antages at krydre en moderrolle på film. (p 19)

[He looks at me with empathy and understands straight away that Dis is our mutual concern and that I would not flare up and make accusations against prison guards or policemen for making the arrest, or treating her badly or something like that supposed to characterise a mother's role in a film.]

However, as her antagonism towards the patriarchy grows, the portrayal of the prison guard changes to show him as an expressionless player in a system void of emotion. The extent of the change in her character is revealed by her attack on the policeman she sees hitting a young man - possibly her daughter's ex-boyfriend Oli - during the Chernobyl demonstration. This also shows her change of attitude towards young people in general, whom she previously regards with fear and distrust.

The mother is guided in her development by the bar-owner Anna, whose acceptance of and warmth towards her unlikely guest is in great contrast to her own initial judgemental attitude.

### **ANNA/URD - THE TWO WISE WOMEN**

Anna's role as wise woman and spiritual guide is paralleled to that of Urd in Dis/Gunlød's story (even to the extent of her being the modern day equivalent to the provider of mead). As in Snorri's *Prose Edda*, Urd is portrayed as being in charge of the well at the base of the Ash of Yggdrasil, and Urd and Gunlød pour water over the boughs of the tree in the novel. She is the weaving Fate seen sitting weaving in her loom-house, and the image of her occupation is taken up in the text: "Luften tyk som skæbnegudindens vævning" (p 157) [The air thick like the goddess of fate's weaving].

Urd is responsible for instructing Gunlød in the way of religion and in making the mead, and she cryptically reminds her repeatedly of her role as priestess. Her repeated command to "Glem aldrig at du er viets præstinde" [Never forget that you are the priestess of initiation] (pp 61, 99, 119, 159, 171, 204, 205) can be seen to

answer the question "Hvem er hun egentlig denne Gunlød?" [Who is she actually, this Gunlød?] (p 90).

The description of Anna's wisdom links her to Urd through the image of the well:

"Annas visdom var som en udtømmelig brønd" (p 201) [Anna's wisdom was like a bottomless well].

In the depiction of the Bronze Age world after Odin has seized power Urd is described as being forced to tell Odin the future in a passage that clearly parallels the Sibyl's prophecy in *Völuspá*. Urd's ability to see into the future is paralleled by Anna's wisdom which heavily draws on popular culture. Like Urd, she has seen it all before and describes the deception of Gunlød as "Den samme gamle historie" [the same old story] (p 114). She guides the narrator through events, and appears to do so naturally and without effort. Anna's natural wisdom comes not from entrails but from the television, which can be seen to be the oracle of the twentieth century, and the images conjured up by this (mysterious) aspect of the contemporary world are reinforced by the repeated allusion throughout the book to film. The mother says for instance that her familiarity with the inside of a prison comes from television, and adds that she feels as if she is "i en tredjeklasse gangsterfilm" (p 21) [in a third rate gangster movie].

The development process in the novel can be seen in some ways to be comparable to the process often seen in fairy tales, where a central character must often set out on a journey and complete a set task. In the context of fantastical realism it seems singularly appropriate that traits familiar from fairy tales should be present in *Gunnlaðar saga*, as they are incontrovertibly one of the oldest forms of fantastical narrative.

## THE MOTHER AS DETECTIVE

The mother's detective-work in *Gunnlaðar saga* extends beyond the pages of the library books, and she goes to the back streets of Copenhagen in an attempt to find Oli, whom she feels may be able to help her understand Dis' story. Although the mother's journey is in a realistic setting, to the narrator the back streets are as alien to her as the Bronze Age initially is to Dis. In addition, the streets of Denmark are already a foreign environment to the Icelandic characters. The 'fantastic' nature of the environment the narrator finds herself in is reflected in the choice of words in the narrative. The "underverden" [underworld] she enters is described largely in terms, and images, of being under water. The sense of detachment she feels is made clear from the outset, and again here she describes her experience with allusion to film: "skulle jeg vise dig vores vandring på film ville jeg filme os bagfra" (p 134) [if I were to portray our journey on film, I'd film us from behind]. Her companion and guide on the journey is Fisken whose name [lit: "the fish"] suggests that he is familiar with the environment, and also gives him a rather mystical air. The sense of mysticism and connection to fairy tale is further increased by the fact that he chooses to give her *three* pieces of advice:

At have en løs pengeseddel parat som jeg kan tage frem i en fart til en voldsmand eller tigger. Holde øjnene for mig selv uden at glo som turist og for det tredje at lade ham bestemme farten. (p 135)  
[To have a loose banknote ready which I can take out at speed for a mugger or beggar. Keep my eyes to myself without staring like a tourist, and thirdly to let him decide the pace.]

In addition their journey takes them through three different quarters of the "underverden" - each more horrible in the eyes of the narrator than the last. From the

relatively unintimidating outskirts of the down-town area they travel through the immigrant quarter, which she describes as merely being a "ventesal" [waiting room], to the part in which Oli - and presumably also Dis - has lived. She fails to find Oli, and although she does conclude that he has nothing directly to do with Dis' predicament, it seems that on this occasion the task is concerned more with the journey itself, than any discovery she might make. This journey to downtown Copenhagen is an essential part of her enlightenment process. Signs of her progress are already visible; she feels sympathy, rather than disgust, for an impoverished young mother and baby she sees, describing her as a madonna (p 139). She is also beginning to realize the need to take positive action herself, instead of abdicating responsibility. She is aware that Fisker will not help her decide what, if anything, should be done about the girl's plight. The fact that her proposed solution is to take the girl back to the bar for Anna to help, shows just how far she still has to develop.

In connection to Dis the repeated image of 'trylleringen' [the magic ring] - the protection the mother wants to extend to her daughter - has connotations of the fairy tale, and Dis' initial journey into the past through the mirror is reminiscent of 'bergtaging' [enchantment, lit: being lured into the mountain] in traditional folk tales:

Disse øjne tryllebandt Dis med så voldsom kraft at hun ikke kunne rive sig fra dem. Hun syntes hun var ved at synke ind i dem ... hun blev trukket stadig nærmere og længere ned indtil det svimlede for hende ... hun mærkede at hun var ved at falde men blev så med uhyre hastighed suget ligesom gennem en dyb brønd i retning af lyset i disse øjne indtil hun stod over for dem og foran hende en ung kvinde som langsomt lagde spejlet ned uden at tage øjnene fra hende. I øjnenes blånen blinkede lyset i hurtige brydninger som et tavst sprog. I hendes stemme forventning og tyst undren da hun hviskede:

Du er kommet!

Som om hun var ventet. (p 28)

[These eyes entranced Dis with such a violent power that she could not escape them. She thought she was about to sink into them ... she was pulled steadily nearer and further down until she became dizzy ... she noticed that she was about to fall but was then with incredible speed sucked in as if through a deep well in the direction of the light in these eyes until she was standing opposite them and in front of her was a young woman who slowly put the mirror down without taking her eyes from her. In the blueness of the eyes the light flashed in rapid refractions/ shuddering like a silent language. There was expectation and soft wonderment in her voice when she whispered:

You've come!

As if she had been expected.]

The light in Urd's eyes as she draws Dis into the past is reflected in the portrayal of Dis, and the light and sense of freedom associated with Dis form a contrast to the darkness of Odin's character and acts. Dis is portrayed more as a type than as a psychologically composed person. The name Dis suggests linguistically not only 'goddess', but also 'haze' and Dis' character encompasses both these ideas.

Within the context of the modern story it is also possible to perceive types for instance among the customers in Anna's bar. But these types can be linked both to the idea of types in fairy tales and the mother's initial tendency to stereotype. As she becomes familiar with the people in the bar the descriptions become less caricatured, and finally she describes them as her friends (a term she incidentally does not apply to her acquaintances in Iceland).

The mother's acceptance of and by her backstreet friends indicates her movement in the opposite direction to typical social movement in fairy tales in which the hero/heroine moves upwards (from pauper to prince). Her improvement is spiritual (compare to Lindgren's Frö, discussed in Chapter Three, who can be seen to be



spiritually decadent). Although she literally acquires the golden treasure, this is a symbolic acquisition and one which will be removed from her. The real acquisition she makes is on a personal level.

### THE BETRAYAL OF GUNNLÖD

Towards the climax of *Gunnlaðar saga* the build up of suspense is intense, the story is one of betrayal and deceit, and the inclusion of traits familiar from the detective story make the novel thriller-like. Many of the numerous references made to film are to detective or spy films, and the mother behaves rather like an amateur private detective. Jakobsdóttir's story is in some ways an inversion of the detective genre as the crime under investigation is not at first clear. Initially it seems to be the one for which Dis has been arrested - then, as the betrayal of Gunnlöd by Odin becomes apparent, the accusing finger moves away from Dis/Gunnlöd to Odin himself, and in turn also to the mother as she reaches the realization that it is her own 'crime' that she has been investigating, and she concludes: "Det var mig der svigtede" (p 199) [It was I who betrayed], acknowledging that she is guilty of betraying Gunnlöd by setting the wheels in motion to have her daughter diagnosed psychiatrically ill, and consequently consigning her story to the realms of mental illness. The repeated questioning of the mother by characters such as the lawyer, the psychiatrist and Anna adds to the impression of *Gunnlaðar saga* as a crime novel as although the questions directed at her are connected with the situation Dis finds herself in, it is very much as if the mother herself is being interrogated. She is therefore both the detective and the accused. The unexpected twists in the plot - such as the theft of the cauldron by Odin and later by the mother - are also familiar from the crime novel.

When the mother finally acknowledges her guilt she talks about the Gunlød she has betrayed, and what she symbolizes to her:

Gunlød som ikke kendte til svig, Gunlød som var gudindens som var digtekunsten som var kærligheden og jeg fattede hendes sorg over det formålsløse i den lidelse der isner når det bliver slidt sønder som sammen hører. (p 201)

[Gunnlod who had no knowledge of betrayal, Gunlod who was the goddess's, who was the art of poetry, who was love, and I understood her sorrow over the futility of the suffering that turns to ice when that which belongs together is torn apart.]

The betrayal of Dis/Gunlød is pivotal to both levels of the story, and the dramatic climax of the novel comes when Odin overthrows the power of the goddess.

The character of Odin is described by Dagny Kristjánsdóttir as an ever-present shadow:

Odinskikkelsen er tilstedeværende gjennom hele Dis/Gunnlød fortellingen - som en skygge. Som "noe" skjult i mørket, en potensiell trussel. Mannens begjær er en "skygge" i Gudindens solfylte verden.

(Kristjánsdóttir, 1988: 57)

[The Odin figure is constantly present through the whole Dis/Gunlod story - like a shadow. Like "something" hidden in the dark, a potential threat. The desire of man is a "shadow" in the Goddess's sun filled world.]

The imagery connected to Odin is full of those shadows which intrude into the lives of women; the making of iron, and Odin's seizing of power, is described in terms similar to rape, and there is a sinister darkness in his eyes. The ceremony, which for Gunlød is a sacred act demonstrating Odin's right to rule:

Da skulle jeg for første gang udføre præstindens højeste pligt. Bære karret i mine hænder. Give den vordende konge den dyre mjød. Slynge mine arme

om ham. Indvie ham til land og rige. (p 59)  
 [Then I should for the first time carry out the priestess's highest duty.  
 Carry the cauldron in my hands. Give the future king the precious mead.  
 Fling my arms around him. Consecrate him to land and realm.]

is for Odin a means of gaining the symbol of power. He takes a steel knife into the goddess's underground chamber and having slept with Gunlød takes the cauldron forcibly, saying that he has been given it, along with the power it represents:

Han hævdede at de almægtige guder havde skænket ham all magt over ofringerne og at det nu var ham alene der besad indsigt i gudernes vilje indtil der var dem der troede at han selv var en mægtig gud og havde magt over liv og død. (p 205)  
 [He maintained that the almighty gods had given him all power over the sacrifices and that it was now him alone who possessed insight into the will of the gods until there were those who believed that he was himself a mighty god with power over life and death.]

Gunlød relates how it has been predicted that Odin should be "æret fremfor alle konger" (p 72) [honoured above all kings], and the actions which lead to him gaining in prestige lead to the goddess's/Gunlød's disgrace, and the goddess (and women) loses her (their) role in the cultural processes:

Og gudinden glemte de, vanærede og forhånede hende. Ond trolddom kaldte de hendes hellige digt og forbød dem for mennesker. (p 206)  
 [And they forgot the goddess and dishonoured her and despised her.  
 They called her holy poetry evil magic and banned it.]

The betrayal of Gunlød by Odin and the mother can be seen to symbolize the betrayal of the positive life-forces in nature: a denial of the importance of balance in the natural world and of the relevance of non-rational emotion to truth. Dis/Gunlød is betrayed

on all levels, the betrayal extends beyond Odin and the mother, to Gunlød's father and her friend Loke.

On the Bronze Age plane, Gunlød's relationship with Loke is close, they have grown up together, and have parallel social roles. Just as Gunlød is going to follow in her (Bronze Age) mother's footsteps and become a priestess, Loke is being trained by Gunlød's (Bronze Age) father to take over as head priest. Gunlød says that as a child, before it became clear that she would be a priestess (a role in which she may not marry), she imagined she would marry Loke, and her description of their meeting reveals her physical desire for him:

Han lagde sig med hovedet i mit skød og jeg strøg ham over håret som var han en plaget og udmattet bjørneunge og inden i mig kappedes kådhed og forventning. Og det var ikke frit for at jeg mærkede en gysen ned langs ryggraden! (p 94)

[He laid his head in my lap and I stroked his hair as if he were a bothered and worn out bear cub and inside of me raced lust and expectation. And it can't be denied that I felt a shiver down my spine!]

Later in the build up to the initiation of Odin, Loke in his fear of the goddess asks Gunlød to take away his loneliness and in resisting him she withstands her greatest temptation.

From the start Gunlød recognizes Loke's changeability, however she fails to realize that he is therefore almost predestined by dint of his character to betray her, turning against her and following Odin.

Loke's emotions and thoughts run through his eyes. His ability to mimic animals and alter shape indicates his tendency to change, to go with the flow. He is a natural poet,

words flowing easily from his tongue, and the verse he quotes Gunlød indicates a darker side to his otherwise light character for it mentions the snake and the wolf connected with the downfall of the gods:

Jeg var tågeregnen  
som tumlede slangen  
formet af flintesten.  
På den øde strand  
en ask var jeg,  
søn af kvinde, kvinde selv.  
Ulvens far

(p 98)

[I was the misty rain  
who tumbled the snake  
formed from flint stone.  
On the deserted beach  
I was an ash,  
son of woman, woman myself.  
The wolf's father]

Although he sees the danger of Odin's plans, he is easily led by the king's enthusiasm, and his open face allows him to be easily manipulated. His betrayal seems all the greater because of the deep love Gunlød feels for him. While the novel as a whole has a revisionist approach, Jakobsdóttir stops short of rehabilitating Loke/Loki, and retains the negative portrayal found in Snorri's *Prose Edda* (compare Villy Sørensen's approach to Loke above, pages 82 - 88).

Loke's abandonment of Gunlød and the goddess shows him to have the same lust for power as Odin. Gunlød sees a similarity between the two men, despite their physical differences - when Odin comes into the grave chamber she thinks for a moment that he is Loke. Loke and Odin become blood brothers, and Gunlød says that Loke's scar

from the ritual involved will last a long time, and it is clear that this is on a spiritual as well as a physical level. Odin can also be seen to suffer spiritually as a consequence of his increasing his worldly power:

Fredløs er han og han stoler ikke på nogen, mistænksom og forpint  
frygter han sin edsbroder som vil rejse sig mod ham og han frygter ulven  
der skal sluge ham og fyldt med angst samler han døde til sine hærskarer  
for altid er spådommen den samme. (p 207)

[He is without peace and trusts no-one, suspicious and anguished he  
fears his blood-brother who will rise up against him, and he fears the  
wolf that will devour him, and filled with fear he gathers the dead to be  
his warriors because the prediction is always the same.]

Other men in the novel can be seen to side with worldly authority as epitomized by Odin. At first the picture of Gunlød's Bronze Age father is of an affectionate parent, but he is also a powerful priest, and he too chooses to remain powerful - on the side of Odin - rather than remain loyal to his daughter. The fathers on both time planes are nameless. Thus they act as symbols of fatherhood, and the fact that they both disown their daughter can be seen to represent the father abdicating responsibility for the child's supposed misdemeanour.

Most of the men in the novel are associated with the establishment, and the colours associated with the various policemen, judges and prison warders the mother meets in contemporary Denmark are dull: navy blue and grey, colours which reflect the tedium of their lives. The psychiatrist - the twentieth century equivalent of a sage - talks wistfully of the land Dis describes, and despite his scepticism the lawyer is persuaded to put Dis' story to the court as a serious argument.



Jakobsdóttir's use of symbolism and in particular her use of Norse myth in *Gunnlaðar saga* goes beyond the level of the plot: symbolism and intertextuality are inexorably linked. The author's familiarity with the myths is reflected by the manner in which the book is saturated with mythological material; not only in the actual story about Gunlød but also in the style of the novel and her choice of words.

Elements from a number of other myths have also been incorporated into the Gunlød story, especially in the description of the ritual surrounding the metaphorical marriage between the mortal king and the goddess represented by Gunlød. For instance, we see how Odin's eye is blinded as an offering to the moon before he is allowed to drink the holy mead - a reference to the mythical Odin giving up one of his eyes as payment for a drink from the well of knowledge. Among many of the other myths alluded to is the myth of the death of Balder. Gunlød's task of having to cry Odin out of Hel during the initiation ceremony is reminiscent of Hel's decree that Balder will only be released from Hel:

If all things in the world, alive and dead, weep for him, then he shall go back to the Æsir, but be kept with Hel if any objects or refuses to weep.  
(Snorri, 1987: 50)

The novel's language throughout is coloured by the myths, and there are several stream of consciousness passages which reflect the style of the *Poetic Edda* with cryptic and poetic use of language such as quoted above (pages 14-18). In this respect *Gunnlaðar saga* differs stylistically from the greater body of Jakobsdóttir's work. Although the inspiration for the storyline comes from *Hávamál*, this is not the only Eddic poem which is clearly visible: several passages make clear allusions to *Völuspá*, sometimes mirroring phrases found within the Old Norse poem. For

instance the desolate post-Ragnarok landscape is described in an early passage set in the Bronze Age, and the sun is described as appearing:

som om den ikke længre kunne finne sin bane og ikke vidste hvor den  
hørte hjemme. (p 55)  
[as if it could no longer find its path and did not know where it  
belonged.]

This clearly echoes *Völuspá*'s fifth verse which describes how at the dawn of time:

The sun did not know    where its hall would stand  
the stars did not know    where they would be set,  
the moon did not know    what would be its might.  
(*Elder Edda*, 1991: 1)

This use of the creation verses in *Völuspá* to refer to the Ragnarok-like destruction emphasizes the concept of events occurring in a cyclic rather than a linear manner, and when in the build-up to the ceremony with Odin a similar allusion is made:

Solen kender ikke sin bane. Månen har mistet sin kraft. (p 160)  
[The sun does not know its path. The moon has lost its power.]

we can with hindsight see the connection between the two.

On the modern level of the story, allusion is also made to myths. Often this intertextuality can be seen to be a device to link events in the two levels of the story, for instance the oak tree in the hospital garden - a sacred tree in Celtic tradition - alludes to the Ash of Yggdrasil. This is explained by previous mention of the ash tree in the Bronze Age story, and the narrator's serving of *guldøl* ["gold" beer](p 176) when she realizes that the betrayal/failure was not committed by Gunlød is a clear allusion to the mead.

As with the works by Sørensen and Lindgren, biblical allusions are also made (a number of these have been mentioned, for instance the mother washing Anna's feet, and the father washing his hands of Dis). In a further similarity to the two works discussed previously, we can see how Jakobsdóttir - by linking the structure and content of *Gunnlaðar saga* - is strengthening underlying themes within the novel. As in *Ragnarok* and *Kärleksguden Frö* the motif of time runs through *Gunnlaðar saga* and is reflected in the structure of the novel which (if one, for the purpose of symmetry, excludes the last few paragraphs where it is revealed that the mother is writing from a prison cell) starts and finishes with the mother on the plane, and on the Dis/Gunlöd level starts and finishes with Ragnarok-like descriptions. The outer circle is made up of smaller interconnecting rings. Dagny Kristjansdóttir describes the novel as having:

en ringkomposisjon; den utgjør en ring som lukkes og samtidig åpner seg for å begynne en ny ring. Og innenfor disse ringene går fortellingen i sirkelbevegelser mellom rom og tidsplan. (Kristjansdóttir, 1990: 41)  
 [a ring composition: it makes a ring which closes and simultaneously opens to start a new ring. And within these rings the story goes in circular movements between the space- and time-planes.]

Implicit in Dis' rejection of linear, or "kunstig" [artificial], time is a rejection of the patriarchal social system. She discards her expensive watch (also a sign of her rejection of materialism) and states that "Tiden er inden i mennesket" (p 8) [Time is inside the human being].

## REVISIONIST MYTHMAKING

When the mother steps in to reclaim the cauldron she is taking back not only Gunlød's story, but the symbol of women's place in the cultural process. She is stepping out of the darkness cast by the shadows of Odin's actions, and to which she has allied herself, and into the Goddess's light:

[da vakten] viste karret ud vidste jeg at dette hus var et gravkammer, hver sten i dets vægge var vantroens, fordommenes og foragtens sten. Jeg kendte det fra den tid hvor jeg selv var sådan, hver celle i min krop ligesom stenene i dette hus. Og hvis man opholder sig i et sådant hus så dør man med mindre man får en anelse om forskellen på bælgmørke og ulyks som bliver til lys. (pp 211-212)

[When the guard showed the cauldron around, I knew that the building was a burial chamber - every stone in its walls was a stone of scepticism, prejudice and contempt. I knew it from the time when I was also like that, each cell in my body like the stones in this building. And if one stays in a building like this one dies, unless one gets a hunch about the difference between the pitch black and lack of light which becomes light.]

The decision by the mother to reclaim and re-tell Gunlød's story can be paralleled to the ideas on myth presented by Mircea Eliade, and quoted in Section I (see above, page 6):

By reciting the myths one reconstitutes that fabulous time and hence in some sort become "contemporary" with the events described (...) As a summary formula we might say that by "living" the myths one emerges from profane, chronological time and enters a time that is of a different quality, a sacred Time at once primordial and indefinitely recoverable.

(Eliade, 1963: 18)

This powerful idea about the reciting of myths has direct relevance to Dis' story, and her 'living' of Gunlød's story moves her spiritually and physically to a different plane. Dis is described as being a "fri fange" [free prisoner] (p 10) and the act of reclamation

can be seen to be one of spiritual freedom. In his book *The Myth of the Eternal Return* Mircea Eliade describes how the cosmic cycle - the repeated movement from Chaos to Cosmos - can be overcome:

From this cycle without beginning or end, man can wrest himself only by an act of spiritual freedom. (Eliade, 1989: 115)

The reclamation of the cauldron by both Dis and the mother embodies such an act, and can be seen, on a symbolic level, to end the cycle of betrayal of Gunlød.

### **GUNNLAÐAR SAGA - A FEMINIST NOVEL?**

Despite Svava Jakobsdóttir's claim that it should not be read primarily as a feminist novel, *Gunnlaðar saga* can be used as a model example of feminist revision of myth. The point of view of the story is shifted from that of Odin as an amorous hero and daring adventurer, to Gunlød/Gunnlod's point of view where the theft is clearly an act of treachery. A previously negatively portrayed Gunnlod is shown in a better light (having been seen as an essentially impure, easily seduced giantess, she becomes a defiled but essentially pure priestess/goddess). The subtext of the novel suggests that the negative and violent nature of capitalist/patriarchal society will lead to environmental/nuclear disaster and that, unless the balance of power is corrected, the process cannot be reversed.

In addition to the division between male and female, the novel also contains the dimension of social division (epitomized by the contrast between the high class hotel and the low class bar), and there is also a clear environmentalist message as both Odin's desire to extract iron (a destructive ambition) and the splitting of the atom (the

consequences of which are revealed in the dangers/disaster of Chernobyl) are referred to as going against nature.

The novel speaks out in favour of life and implies that the positive creative side of female culture epitomized by the earth goddess is essential for the harmony and well-being of both men and women. Svava Jakobsdóttir is not advocating a reversal of power but a return to a natural balance. The power in the Bronze Age is not portrayed as being vested in a matriarchy: instead there is a *balance* of power between the female/goddess/ non-rational and the male/king/rational. The novel argues eloquently in favour of a recognition that "sandheden er bygget op af følelse" (p 9) [truth is built up from feelings] and that scientific fact is not necessarily the whole or only truth. Only when harmony between the sexes and in nature is reinstated can the cycle of war and destruction be halted. The reclaiming of the cauldron represents a restoration of harmony, an attempt to avert disaster, and not a seizing of power. The symbol of Gunlød/Gunnlod - of the priestess and goddess - in *Gunnlaðar saga* is not used solely to empower women: male and female characters alike are shown to suffer from the consequences of the system initiated by Odin when he steals the cauldron.



## CHAPTER FIVE: HISTORICAL RAGNAROK

### VERA HENRIKSEN'S *RAVN OG DUE*

So far in the presentation of contemporary texts we have seen how authors use Norse mythology as the basis for allegory (Sørensen), allegorical fantasy (Lindgren), and fantastic realism (Jakobsdóttir). Jakobsdóttir's *Gunnlaðar saga* discussed in the previous chapter can be seen to have retained the religious associations of the mythologically based characters such as Gunnlod and Odin who appear in her novel, but within the story they are clearly human with religious roles to act out within the context of the Bronze Age setting which makes up one of the time planes in the novel. The role of the Norse gods is more clearly metaphysical in the historical novels of Norwegian author Vera Henriksen (born 1927) where the myth is portrayed as a religion featuring in the lives of her characters. A prolific writer and well known for her attention to historical detail, her debut in 1961-63 with the trilogy *Solvhammeren* [The Silver hammer] (1961), *Jærtegn* [Omen] (1962), and *Helgenkongen* [The saint king] (1963) drew on Snorri's *Heimskringla*, and her works combine her deep love of history with a keen interest in psychology and religion.

Best known for her highly successful fiction set in the Viking Age, Henriksen has also written novels set in the Reformation, and non-fiction works about the Viking Age and Viking beliefs such as *Skjebneveven* [The weaving of fate] (1982) about women in the Icelandic sagas, and *Verdenstreet: Mennesker og makter i Odins tid* [The world tree: people and powers in Odin's time] (1984). In these, as in her novels, she encourages the reader to understand the beliefs represented in

the Norse literature by looking into the minds of their pagan ancestors.

Henriksen's approach to the Norse myths in *Verdenstreet* is holistic in the unusual but effective way she combines presentation of the mythology with folklore. She stresses the way in which the environment - both social and natural - have shaped the myths, writing:

Mennesket har skapt myten ut fra de muligheter som er nedlagt i dets eget sinn, dets fantasiverden - myten er blitt levende, og har så vært med på å forme mennesket. Så lenge myten har hatt livets rett, har denne gjensidige prosessen fortsatt. (Henriksen, 1993: 32-33)  
 [People have created myth on the basis of the possibilities laid down in their own minds, their world of imagination - myth has become alive, and has in turn served to form humans. As long as myth has had the right to live, this two way process has continued.]

This process of shaping, and being shaped by, myths can be seen to have implications for the characters that appear within the pages of her novels, and in the trilogy *Bodvars saga* [Bodvar's saga] (1983-1989) - most notably in the third volume *Ravn og due* [Raven and dove] (1989) - the social and personal clashes and crises caused by a general shift in belief, and the passing of the old gods, are the principal sources of conflict.

### **BODVARS SAGA**

*Ravn og Due* continues the story of *Bodvars saga* begun in *Odins ravn* [Odin's Raven] (1983) and *Spydet* [The Spear] (1984). As the name of the trilogy suggests, Bodvar is the central figure in the tale, although the point of view shifts from chapter to chapter between Bodvar (the main point of view), his wife

Hallveig, and his half brother Rivla . Although Rivla is, like many of those who appear in the novel, mentioned in the sagas, notably *Egils saga* and *Njals saga*, the characters of Bodvar and Hallveig are fictional. For the purposes of the story, Bodvar is portrayed as the illegitimate grandson of the famous Icelandic poet Egil Skallagrimsson. The first two novels in the trilogy describe how having been rejected by his father's wife, Bodvar has been brought up by his grandfather from whom he learns the skaldic art and to follow Odin. Despite his growing love for Hallveig - a follower of Freya - he travels out into the world to seek fame and fortune at the age of nineteen. He has also acquired wealth from his grandfather whose silver Bodvar has obtained by dishonourable means. While on his travels he falls under the magnetic charm of a powerful "volve" [seeress], Ragnhild. The novel *Ravn og Due* starts when 22 year old Bodvar returns to Iceland in the year 996 AD.

*Ravn og Due* is in many ways a family epic and spans a comparatively long period of time, with many different characters and sub-plots. However, the central conflict in the novel can be narrowed down to two themes: the spiritual conflict around the time of conversion to Christianity in Iceland around the year 1000 AD between the heathen religion and Christianity; and the personal conflict between man and wife as Bodvar and Hallveig attempt to come to terms with their differing religious allegiances and with the consequences of his marital infidelities.

In this way the Norse heathen religion can be seen to play a large part in the central conflict in the novel, even though the gods themselves are not actual characters playing an active role in the plot as is the case with the novels in the previous chapters. The only sightings of the god the reader receives is through

Hallveig's visions. The gods are metaphysical and closer to the Christian concept of gods with a primarily spiritual presence. The backdrop to Bodvar's own spiritual crisis is the national political/religious crisis in Iceland around the year 1000 AD.

The events surrounding the pragmatic conversion are described at length. Use of the three narrative points of view in the description increases the drama as the issues are seen in a variety of lights, and the shift in perspective also adds a sense of objectivity to what is essentially the author's interpretation of events which took place one thousand years ago.

Rivla and Bodvar belong to two different religious/ political groups, and the chapter "Bodvar og Rivla: En lovsigemanns dom" [Bodvar and Rivla: a lawspeaker's judgement] describing the conversion of Iceland at the 'Althing' [legislative assembly/court] of 1000 AD, alternates between their differing points of view (spatially and politically). This not only increases the dramatic tension, but also shows the two sides to the events, and emphasises the divisions between Christians and non-Christians, as well as internally within the two groups.

Hallveig - who remains firm in her allegiance to Freya - is not present at the assembly, but the reader is privy to the alarming visions and dreams of Ragnarok (the downfall of the gods) which she has in the period leading up to the events. These are related in the subsequent chapter and emphasise the magnitude of the events in the preceding chapter. They also introduce a mythical element which adds to the sense of the conversion as something apocalyptic. Placing the dreams and visions retrospectively rather than chronologically as Henriksen does, also

avoids having to slow down the pace of the story with interpretations for the reader.

### **FAITH AND FIDELITY**

The closest the reader gets to the Norse gods is through the experiences of Hallveig who does not waver from the heathen religion. Bodvar himself takes a political stance on the side of the old beliefs, however, and seeks to find out if the new religion will provide solutions to his dilemma.

While the old religion has many gods, the characters are shown to have individual allegiance to specific gods, and like his 'grandfather', Bodvar follows Odin.

Bodvar is disillusioned with Odin's treachery. He has been compelled by the heathen code of honour to kill his friend Donkad following Donkad's killing of Bodvar's foster brother Bjørn:

Jeg hadde vært Odins mann siden jeg var seksten vintre gammel, og mine år i hans tjeneste hadde ført meg dit at jeg måtte drepe min beste venn. At Odin er svikefull, visste jeg; det hadde jeg godtatt før jeg gav ham min troskap. Og jeg kunne dø som Odins mann. Men jeg kunne ikke leve videre med det som hadde skjedd. (p 27<sup>1</sup>)  
 [I had been Odin's man since I was sixteen winters old, and my years in his service had led me to the point at which I had to kill my best friend. I knew that Odin is traitorous, I had accepted that before I gave him my allegiance. And I could die as Odin's man. But I could no longer live with what had happened.]

Bodvar's warrior nature and poetry are inextricably linked to his being "Odins mann". Thus the difficulties he experiences in maintaining his allegiance to Odin

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<sup>1</sup> Page references refer to hard back edition published by Aschehoug: Oslo, 1989

also lead him to have problems writing poetry:

Å dikte var å hedre Odin, skaldskapsguden. Odin, som gav sine venner de beste gaver: kunnskap, skaldskap, seier. Den svikefulle Odin som til gjengjeld kunne finne på å ta fra sine tilhengere det som de holdt aller mest av.

Odin stod bak Donkads død. Hvordan kunne Bodvar da hedre Odin med et kvad som gav utløp for raseriet over det som hadde skjedd?

(p 33)

[To write was to honour Odin, the god of poetry. Odin, who gave his friends the best gifts: knowledge, the skaldic art, victories. The treacherous Odin who in return could decide to take from his followers that which they treasured most.

Odin was behind Donkad's death. How could Bodvar then honour Odin with a poem that was an outlet for his anger over what had happened?]

This emphasis on the individual's specific, and presumably pragmatic, allegiance to one of many gods makes the mass transferral of allegiance to the Christian god seem more plausible within the context of the community depicted.

Bodvar's own spiritual crisis regarding Odin is juxtaposed to and normalised by his grandfather's earlier similar crisis. The inclusion of Egil Skallagrimsson's poem 'Sonatorrek' written after the drowning of one of Egil's sons highlights Odin's known treacherous nature:

Godt stod jeg meg  
med spydguden,  
trygg var jeg  
i troskap til ham -  
til vognguden,  
seiergiveren,  
brøt vennskapets  
sterke bånd.



Jeg bloter ikke  
 til Viljes bror,  
 til gudehøvdingen,  
 godvillig.  
 Men enda vet jeg  
 at Mimes venn  
 har gitt meg bot  
 som kan bøte skaden.

Ulvens fiende,  
 kampfyrsten,  
 gav meg skaldskapens  
 lytefri gave,  
 gav meg et sinn  
 som drev mine skjulte  
 lumske fiender  
 frem i lyset.

Tungt er livet.  
 Taus, urørlig,  
 står på neset  
 vargens søster.  
 Enda skal jeg  
 uten sorg  
 med villig sinn  
 vente døden.

(p 34)

[I got on well  
 with the spear god,  
 I was secure  
 in allegiance to him -  
 until the chariot god,  
 the giver of victory  
 broke friendship's  
 strong bonds.

I do not sacrifice  
 to Vilje's brother  
 to the chief god,  
 willingly.  
 But still I know  
 that Mime's friend  
 has given me dues  
 that can atone for the damage.

The wolf's enemy  
 the prince of battle,  
 gave me the poetic art's  
 faultless gift,  
 gave me a mind  
 which drove my hidden  
 treacherous enemies  
 out into the light.

Heavy is life  
 Silent, motionless,  
 stands on the headland  
 the wolf's sister.  
 Yet I shall  
 without sorrow  
 with willing mind  
 await death.]

Inclusion of authentic text in the fictional narrative, albeit normalised to make a more 'readable' Norwegian, adds an air of historicity to the novel and also lays the way open for the later use of *Völuspá* as a device for Bodvar's own poetic reflection as a means of exploring his spiritual dilemma at Hallveig's suggestion.

Bodvar's crisis in his allegiance to Odin is expanded on through his lengthy discussions with the priest Adalvard whom he and Rivla bring back from England. As a foreigner and a Christian, Adalvard is not familiar with the heathen religion. His attempts to gain knowledge of the religion, and to find similarities between Norse belief and Christianity through his discussions with Bodvar allow not only the introduction of "Bodvar's" poem, but also the inclusion of many stories and beliefs from the myths. For example, Adalvard asks about the creation:

"Hvor kom Bors sønner fra?" spurte Adalvard.

"Deres mor var jotun og het Bestla - jotnene fantes før jorden ble til. Og Bors far het Bure. Om Bure heter det at han ble slikket frem av stein av en ku som het Audhumla og var dannet av rim."

"Skapte Bors sønner jorden av ingenting?"

"Nei. De skapte den av en jotuns kropp - den digre jotnen Yme. Det heter i et kvad:

Av Ymes kropp  
ble jorden skapt;  
knoklene ble til berg,  
blodet til sjø,  
til himmel den rimkalde  
jotnens haus."

"Da gjorde kristendommens Gud det bedre. Han skapte jorden av ingenting." (p 201)

["Where did Bor's sons come from?" asked Adalvard.

"Their mother was a giant and was called Bestla - the giants existed before the world was created. And Bor's father was called Bure. Of Bure it is said that he was licked forth from a stone by a cow called Audhumla who was made of frost."

"Did Bor's sons create the world from nothing?"

"No, they made it from a giant's body - the enormous giant Yme. According to a verse:

From Yme's body  
the earth was created  
his knuckles became mountains  
his blood became sea  
for sky the ice-cold  
giant's skull."

"Then Christianity's God did better. He created the earth from nothing."]

Although he stands closer to the beliefs in terms of time than the reader, explanations to Adalvard regarding the stories and morality of the gods can also be seen to be explanations to the reader as - like the author - both are outsiders. They also enrich the narrative and bring the stories - so often confined to fairy-tale like collections - into a social context in a similar manner to Henriksen's non-fiction accounts. Henriksen's contrasting of the different beliefs enables the reader

to appreciate why certain pagan characters react to events as they do. The view of fate, for instance, as something that could be prophesied in advance, but that could not be altered, precludes definite notions of a person being "good" or "evil" in the Christian sense. As Bodvar tells Adalvard:

Det var ilt, det som Loke gjorde (...) Men Loke er ikke ill. Loke er en jotun, og jotner er asers og menneskers fiender. Han tedde seg som en jotun skal da han fikk Hod til å drepe Balder. Han bare gjorde det som lagnaden krevde av ham.

[What Loke did was bad (...) But Loke isn't bad. Loke is a giant, and giants are the Asers' and humans' enemies. He behaved as a giant should when he got Hod to kill Balder. He merely did that demanded of him by destiny.]

The question of fate versus personal responsibility is one that arises several times in the novel. Freya's association with fate and *seid* (sorcery) is reflected in Hallveig in the same way as Odin's characteristics are reflected in Bodvar, and the first image we receive of Hallveig in the novel is of her spinning -an activity closely connected to the goddesses of fate, the Norns. While Hallveig accepts that destiny has played a part in the marital problems she experiences with her husband, she also feels that he must bear some of the responsibility:

Visst var det disenes vilje at det skulle bli vranget mellom henne og Bodvar. Men det var Bodvars skyld også at alt hadde gått så galt.

(p 20)

[Of course it was the goddesses' will that things should go wrong between Bodvar and her. But it was also Bodvar's fault that everything had gone so wrong.]

Bodvar, like Odin, is not faithful, and the question of human responsibility arises in a more serious matter later in the novel, when Bodvar takes a young mistress Oddny. Hallveig is jealous and when Oddny subsequently dies in childbirth,

Hallveig is implicated as she has been practising *seid* against her rival:

Det var Frøya som hadde fått henne til å bruke disse kunstene i vinter. Frøya, volven og seidkvinnen Frøya, hadde vist seg for henne i et syn og sagt at hun skulle gjøre det. (p 226)

[It was Frøya who had made her use these crafts last winter. Frøya, the seeress and the sorceress Frøya, had shown herself in a vision and said she should do it.]

However, her regret at what she assumes are the consequences of her actions indicate that she does feel a sense of guilt, and therefore responsibility for Oddny's death, as she sees that she was driven to practise *seid* through her own hate and anger.

Adalvard tells Bodvar not to judge Hallveig too harshly, and suggests that Bodvar must bear some of the blame for Oddny's death:

Er ikke kjærlighets møte med Frøya en manns kjærlighets møte med en kvinne? Drepte du ikke din Oddny? (p 208)

[Isn't love's meeting with Frøya a man's love meeting with a woman? Didn't you kill your Oddny?]

His words are particularly powerful as Bodvar appears to already feel some responsibility for Oddny's death, fearing that his earlier dishonesty regarding his acquisition of his grandfather's silver has brought about the misfortune. Although he has grown afraid of her, Bodvar saves Hallveig from a stoning when he defends her against the bishop's inquisition when the clergyman arrives to investigate rumours of Hallveig practising *seid*.

In contrast to the forceful and inquisition-like approach of many of the Christian priests portrayed, the character of Adalvard presents a positive, peaceful image of

Christianity, and it is this form of Christianity which appeals to Bodvar and is in stark contrast to the use of force the infamous Tangbrand employs in his introduction of Christianity to the island on behalf of the Norwegian king, Olav Tryggvason. However, Tangbrand's form of Christianity gains the upper hand, and in many ways his aggressive method seems less alien to the Icelandic culture than Adalvard's non-aggressive idealistic approach. While Adalvard often has problems finding concepts to link the two religions Olav Tryggvason's priest Tormod states to the Christians when he calls them to arms at the assembly:

"Det er den gode kampen vi skal kjempe," sa han. "Himmelen står  
åpen for den mann som faller!" (p 125)  
["It is the good fight we shall fight," he said.  
"Heaven is open for the man who falls!"]

This contains an unmistakably similar message to the Viking belief that those who fell in battle would go to join the army of fallen warriors living in Valhalla.

Despite Adalvard's problems with many aspects of the Norse religion he is surprisingly tolerant towards the heathen belief, and does not reject similarities in belief out of hand. Hallveig asks Bodvar if Adalvard has said anything about the fact the Christian predictions about events in the future were so similar for Christians and heathens and gets the reply:

Han sa at fremtiden er den samme for kristne og ikke-kristne. Og  
de som kan se inn i fremtiden, vil se det samme hva de enn tror på.  
(p 143)  
[He said that the future is the same for Christians and non-  
Christians. And those who can see into the future will see the same  
whatever they believe in.]

When Tangbrand's version of Christianity gains ascendance in Iceland, it is not



just the heathen gods, but Adalvard's message of the god of love that is defeated:

"Du taler ikke så høyt lenger," sa Bodvar, "om din guds kjærlighet som skal stanse kjeden av hevn og gi oss fred-."

"Det faller vanskelig å snakke om slikt her i landet - selv om folk kaller seg kristne. Ordene blir maktesløse for meg." (pp 273-274)

["You don't speak so loudly," said Bodvar, "about your god's love which will stop the chain of revenge and give us peace."

"It is difficult to speak of such things in this country - even though people call themselves Christian. For me the words become powerless."]

Bodvar's own actions seem to vindicate this point of view. Despite the appeal of freedom and peace, when his son, Egil, is murdered, his desire for revenge is unwavering and his flirtation with Christianity is over.

Despite his interest in Adalvard's form of Christianity, Bodvar never loses sight of Norse belief, and even when he comes closest to conversion, his thoughts are presented in heathen images:

Bodvars tanker kretset om det som var blitt sagt. Og plutselig så han et helt annet bilde for seg: kua Audhumla som en gang i urtid slikket åsen Bure frem av stein. Det kjentes som om han selv var i ferd med å slikke frem i dagen tanker og følelser som hadde vært innesperret.

Og han ble klar over hvor knugende han hadde følt disenes velde; han så hvordan han, sammen med Odin, hadde kjempet for en frihet som var uoppnåelig innen den verden som hadde vært hans.

(p 306)

[Bodvar's thoughts circled around that which had been said. And suddenly he saw a completely different image before him: the cow Audhumla who once in the beginning of time licked the As Bure forth out of stone. It felt as if he himself was in the process of licking forth thoughts and feelings which had been imprisoned.

And he realised how crushing he had felt the goddesses' rule; he saw how he, with Odin, had fought for a freedom which was unattainable within that world which had been his.]

Bodvar's spiritual conflict, and his conversations with Adalvard are used as a vehicle for the introduction of much of the text of *Völuspá*. Alongside his own ruminations, Bodvar includes images and visions related to him by Hallveig, who is unwavering in her trust in Freya, and as spiritual a character as Adalvard. She alone of the central characters is not drawn towards the Christian faith and, as mentioned above, in the months approaching the introduction of Christianity to Iceland she experiences frightening visions and dreams of Ragnarok:

Hun så Odin, den enøyde Odin i kamp med ulven. Odin svingte sverdet, men den glefsende, snerrende ulven sprang opp og bet hånden med våpenet av ham. Odin vek ikke, han slo med sin ene hånd og sparket. Men ulven gikk på ham, flerret ham opp så invollene veltet ut, satte poten på den døende åsen, løftet den blodige kjeften og ulte, men den hadde Tangbrands hode. (p 142)

[she saw Odin, the one-eyed Odin fighting the wolf. Odin swung his sword but the snapping, growling wolf sprang up and bit off the hand with the weapon. Odin did not retreat, he hit with his one hand and kicked. But the wolf went for him, tore him up so that his guts spilt out, it put its paw on the dying As, lifted its bloody jaw and howled, but it had Tangbrand's head.]

Vera Henriksen includes folklore elements alongside the mythological in the novel, and Hallveig's psychic intuition extends to her being able to see the *fylgje* [attendant spirit in animal form] of the other characters. In folklore terms the *fylgje* can be regarded in the light of the 'Christian' guardian angel and an individual's *fylgje* is related to the person's character: Bodvar's is described as in the form of a raven, and Tangbrand's is a lion. Henriksen thus portrays the heathen community as one in which the natural spirituality does not separate folklore and religious beliefs.

Hallveig's ability to see visions and *fylgjer* is closely linked to her faith in the goddess she follows. However, while she feels she has been chosen by the goddesses to see the future, she also feels that they control what she can see of the future. Thus she sees visions of blood and realises her son is in danger, but it is only when she sees her own *fylgje* - a snow owl - on the boat to Greenland that she realises her own fate, as seeing your own *fylgje* is a portent of death.

Hallveig's relationship with her husband highlights the complexity of the Norse religion which is likened to the conflictful relationship between Odin and Freya, and it is clear that Henriksen here is taking Odin to be synonymous with Freya's husband Od whom Snorri describes as having deserted her (Snorri, 1987).

Hallveig's reconciliation with Bodvar after his infidelity with Ragnhild is made in terms of the relationship between Freya and Odin:

Jeg har tenkt på deg og meg og det som har vært mellom oss. For lenge siden, før jeg drog utenlands, prøvde du å snakke meg til å bli hjemme. Og du snakket om kjærligheten mellom Odin og Frøya, den som endt så brått. Du sa: 'Hva hvis Odin ikke reiste fra Frøya?' Jeg reiste likevel, og siden ble alt vrangt for oss. Og jeg kan komme til å reise igjen. Jeg kan ikke love deg noen troskap, heller. Men hva om Frøya og Odin fant tilbake til hverandre - i hvert fall for en stund?

(p 85)

[I have thought about you and me and that which we have had between us. A long time ago, before I went abroad, you tried to talk me into staying at home. And you spoke about the love between Odin and Frøya, that which ended so abruptly. You said: 'What if Odin didn't go away from Frøya?' I left anyway, and since then everything went wrong between us. And I may leave again. I can not promise you fidelity either. But what if Frøya and Odin found their way back to each other - at least for a while?]

And in reply Hallveig says:

"Og du, Odin, venter at jeg skal ta imot deg?" sa hun. "At jeg skal

gi meg til deg i kjærlighet - på dine vilkår (...) Da er det ikke Frøya du søker. Det er Odins forsømte, overbærende, tålmodige, nesten alltid ventende hustru Frigg." (p 86)

["And you, Odin, expect me to accept you?" she said. "That I should give myself to you in love - on your conditions(...) Then it is not Frøya you are looking for. It is Odin's neglected, indulgent, patient, almost always waiting wife Frigg."]

Although Hallveig reaches out to him on this occasion, it seems inevitable that the relationship over time should change as the young and passionate bride (Freya) becomes the mature neglected wife (Frigg), and Bodvar's later infidelity with the young Oddny strengthens this allusion.

Bodvar chooses to stay with Hallveig, however, even when he could have used her sorcery as a valid reason to leave her after Oddny's death. This decision is closely linked to his final decision to keep to the old religion, and in choosing Hallveig, Bodvar is also choosing Hallveig's norms. It is significant that Bodvar sees Hallveig from the corner of his eye when he receives news of his son Egil's death and determines to seek revenge. While Bodvar at first is hesitant to leave Iceland for the still heathen Greenland, once Egil's death is avenged Bodvar feels, like Hallveig, that they have no place in a Christian Iceland.

The political conflict in the novel is resolved in favour of Christianity, but Bodvar's decision to keep faith with the heathen religion is reflected in the poem. Although he originally planned a Christian ending, he completes it without the Christian images he had initially planned, and a final image is of an ominous hovering dragon:

Der kommer den dystre  
dragen flyvende

glinseorm nede  
 fra Ne-fjellene,  
 bærer lik i fjærene,  
 flyr over vollen.  
 Det er Nidhogg.  
 Nå må hun synke.

(p 317)

[There comes the sombre  
 dragon flying  
 shining serpent down  
 from the Ne-mountains  
 carries corpses in its plumes  
 flies over the plain.  
 It is Nidhogg.  
 Now she must sink.]

Bodvar and Hallveig never reach Greenland as the family perishes after the ship is wrecked. The tragic ending seems as inevitable as the passing of the pagan religion. The final pages of the novel, like *Völuspá* (see Section I, pages 14-18), end with a sense of continuation, however, as Bodvar's surviving relatives stand on the beach.

## **HISTORICAL FICTION AND 'TRUTH'**

Vera Henriksen's novels open up the world of Norse mythology to her readers. The myths she employs are conveyed through the mouths of the characters and with a considerable amount of humour which may be compared to the humour contained in the Icelandic sagas and in the Eddic texts.

It could be argued that the novel's inclusion of fictional characters alongside non-fictional ones confuses history with fiction. Kåre Lunden's article on history and the historical novel, which discusses Henriksen's work, points out how we shape

our understanding of the present through a study of the past, and that this process takes place both in the context of historical studies and historical fiction (Lunden, 1981). *Ravn og Due* has considerable notes at the back of the novel which give background to the reading and a family tree which includes real characters alongside invented ones. Vera Henriksen makes it clear, however, that the information she gives has two intentions: to give the reader an overview over the many characters in the novel, and to clarify which of the characters are from the sagas and which she herself has invented. She also points out that

Opplysninger om personer fra sagaene er historiske bare i den grad  
som sagaene er historisk troverdige (p 330)  
[The information about people from the sagas are historical only to  
that degree which the sagas are historically credible]

demonstrating her awareness of the way in which intertextuality builds on earlier interpretations of myth/history. Giving the trilogy the title *Bodvars saga* links her work with the sagas, as does the inclusion of events surrounding the burning of Njál's home in *Njál's saga*. However, her novels differ from the sagas in the considerable inclusion of the thoughts of her characters.

The novel, like the Icelandic sagas, is a good read: it also contains the author's insight into the period and considerable (and enjoyable) pieces of information about heathen Norse beliefs. The inclusion of Ragnarok/*Völuspá* in a novel about the conversion of Iceland seems a logical, and successful ploy. The use of Ragnarok to portray times of crisis/transition can also be seen to be linked to a sense of crisis in our own time.

Most readers are perfectly able to distinguish between history and an historical



## CHAPTER SIX: POLITICISING RAGNAROK

### TOR OBRESTAD'S *MISTELTEIN*

The novels discussed in the previous four chapters have already begun to demonstrate the variety of ways in which myth can appear in literature, although despite the stylistic differences, they can all be seen to draw particular symbolism from the concept of Ragnarok, and to link this Old Norse image to crisis in the present. This and the following chapter will examine the use of myth in two Norwegian poetry cycles, and we will see how the poets concerned also use Norse myth to symbolise contemporary catastrophe.

Given that much of our knowledge of Norse mythology comes from Old Norse poetry, one would expect to find its influence and intertextual presence more strongly in poetry than in other genres. However, while one finds occasional poems inspired by the Norse myths in collections of more general poetry, there appear to be remarkably few exemplary poetic works making extensive use of mythology<sup>1</sup>. Examination of the works of well-known Scandinavian poets over the past few decades reveals many examples of the re-use of *Classical* mythology, for example in Stein Mehren's *Aurora det niende mørke* [Aurora - the ninth darkness] (1969) and Klaus Rifbjerg's *Mytologi* [Mythology] (1970) but only the occasional reference to Norse mythology. This seems particularly remarkable in Mehren's case as his two volume work entitled *Myte og Formuft* [Myth and reason] (1979/1980) stresses the importance of mythology in the modern world.

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<sup>1</sup> There are of course also exceptions to the rule, and Lönnroth points to the work of Swedish poet Gunnar D Hansson as showing particular influence from Old Norse literature (Lönnroth, 1996).

One possible explanation for the apparent absence of Norse influence on contemporary poets is that the widespread use of Norse mythology by the nineteenth century National Romantic poets in Scandinavia makes any use of, or allusion to, the Norse myths in poetry also an allusion to National Romantic poetry. Showing a similar intention to comment on the contemporary world are Norwegian poets Tor Obrestad and Erling Kittelsen, whose poetry cycles will be discussed in this and the following chapter. Both men are described in separate articles as following in the footsteps of Norwegian National Romantic poets [Hoem 1988, Sætre 1991]. However, Tor Obrestad's *Misteltein* [Mistletoe] (1987) and Erling Kittelsen's *HUN* [She] (1989) can be seen to have been written with very different ideological intentions to their nineteenth century counterparts. Far from attempting, like the National Romantics, to build up or recreate the Scandinavian nations, underlying both the contemporary works is a critique aimed at the foundations of late twentieth century society.

### *MISTELTEIN*

Obrestad's political agenda for his writing has always been openly expressed. In a selection of his essays *Tenningar* [Ignitings] he writes:

"kunst" som ikkje impliserer og ikkje er skapt ut frå dagens problem er likegyldig fordi den formidlar falsk eller uinteressant informasjon og tilbyr ikkje innsikt om vår situasjon her og nå.

(Obrestad, 1982: 36)

["art" which does not implicate, and which is not created on the basis of today's problems is irrelevant because it conveys false or uninteresting information and offers no insight into our current situation.]

In Norwegian literature, Obrestad is primarily associated with the *Profil* [Profile] literary group of the late 1960's and early 1970's. This group, connected to the Norwegian periodical of the same name, radicalised writing in Norway, and initially advocated a move away from traditional realism towards European modernism and Nordic myth and folk tales for inspiration. By 1968, however, the group of authors, had more or less abandoned modernism in favour of using fiction as a vehicle for left-wing political ideas and social models, and it is for his writing from this period that Obrestad is best known.

Although he has had a number of collections of poems published, Obrestad is less well known for his poetry, or his use of Norse myth. In his attack on society in *Misteltein*, however, Tor Obrestad can be seen to be drawing analogy from the myths and literature of the past for his criticism of the present, and in so doing he follows in the footsteps of those writers who have previously combined political goals with literary re-use of mythology.

This political commitment comes through clearly in his poetry cycle *Misteltein* which as a collection has a high number of political poems. The sixty-nine poems have a greater eloquence than Obrestad's prose writing of the 1970's. Written in the minority Norwegian written form *Nynorsk*, *Misteltein* consists of poems composed over at least a nine year period (the poem "Barnelærdom" [Elementary Knowledge] (p 67<sup>2</sup>) is dated 1978). Despite this - and the diverse subject matter of the poems it contains - the collection is cohesive both with regard to strands of thought, and its cyclic structure. The poems are divided into four sections, the first three of which have the separate voices of Balder, an unnamed poet, and a factory worker called Schrøder

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<sup>2</sup> Page numbers refer to edition published by Gyldendal: Oslo, 1988.

respectively. The central importance of the mythological theme suggested by the title is reflected in the subject matter of the initial three poems in the first section, and again in the single poem in the final section - "Balders bálferd" [Balder's pyre] (pp 89-90). The circularity produced by this framework, and the meeting of the three main characters in the third section, combines with the recurrence of images and motifs such as the sun, the snow and trees and foliage to make the work a 'whole', and clearly a cycle, rather than a disparate collection.

### **THE LIFE AND DEATH OF BALDER**

The poems in Balder's voice in the first section of *Misteltein* are poems about the everyday life of a man. This contrasts to what is known of Balder, who is best known in mythological sources for the circumstances surrounding his death.

The story of Balder's death is described in Snorri's *Edda* in *Gylfaginning* [The Deluding of Gylfi]. Snorri tells how Balder the Good was plagued by nightmares suggesting his life was in danger, and how to allay his fears Frigg, his mother, makes all things swear not to harm him apart from the mistletoe which she considers too young. The Aser then demonstrate that any missiles they throw at Balder do not harm him. The trouble-maker Loke, meanwhile, goes to Frigg in disguise as a woman and discovers the omission. He gives a mistletoe arrow to Balder's brother, the blind god Hod, who shoots it at Balder, killing him. The Aser burn Balder in his boat at sea with his wife Nanna who has died of grief, his horse, Odin's ring Draupnir, and a hapless dwarf called Lit who, getting in the way, is kicked onto the fire by Thor who is consecrating the pyre.

The description of the death of Balder in the *Poetic Edda* is clearly linked to the onset of Ragnarok. In *Völuspá* the verses which describe Balder's death (23 and 24) come shortly before the apocalyptic verses describing the collapse of social order before Ragnarok, and in *Balders draumar* [Balder's Dreams] the witch consulted by Odin also connects the events to the downfall of the gods.

Saxo Grammaticus, in contrast to the Eddas, portrays Balder not as a god, but as a human warrior defeated by Hoder, a rival for Nanna's love, and while the first three poems are full of mythological allusion, the first section of *Misteltein* gives a very human version of Balder.

The inevitability of Balder's death is alluded to from the outset. The first poem of the collection "Brått badar lyset over Balder" [The light bathes suddenly over Balder] (p 6) has mythological references to Balder's death and subsequent burning on a funeral pyre, and these allusions are made explicit in the final poem "Balders bålferd" (pp 89-90). "Brått badar lyset over Balder" gives an image of Loke sitting above in the poplar tree collecting the mistletoe that will kill Balder:

Der, mellom greinene, sit Loke.  
I det fjerde tre frå venstre,  
der veks mistelteinen.  
Han skal hente pila  
her, i Frigg sin hage  
veks den nordlegaste misteltein  
i denne verda. Snart kverv han  
under granene innunder åsen,  
på veg til den blinde Hód.

[There, between the branches, sits Loki.  
In the fourth tree from the left,  
there the mistletoe grows.  
He is fetching the arrow

here, in Frigg's garden  
grows the northernmost mistletoe  
in the world. Soon he disappears away  
beneath the spruce trees under the hill,  
on his way to the blind Hód.]

Images of fire connected to the pyre in the final poem are given by the description of the shining leaves in the foliage:

Dei skal bli tente  
av sola sitt honninglys

[They will be lit  
by the honey-light of the sun]

and

bare blanke blad, gneistrande,  
som av ein gjennomsiktig eld.

[bare glittering leaves, sparkling  
as if from a transparent fire.]

In spite of these images of fire, and the reference to Balder's nightmares "Drøymer vonde draumar midt på lyse dagen" [Dreaming dreadful dreams in the middle of the light day] and to Odin's knowledge of events "Odin veit det" [Odin knows], the poem concludes on an almost euphoric note:

Den stille lufta gjennomstrøymt av honning.  
Honninggjennomstrøymde lauv! Honninggjennomstrøymde sjel!  
Mitt lyse hovud gneistrar i den seine sola.

[The still air flowing with honey.  
Honey flowing through leaves! Honey flowing through soul!  
My light head sparkles in the late evening sun.]



This euphoria is seen again in the ecstatic behaviour of the dancers at Balder's funeral described in the cycle's final poem:

På grasvollen dansar allmugen i blomsterange og nattleg dis  
Vakrare enn nå blir det aldri

(p 89)

[On the grassy slope the people dance in flower fragrance and  
nightly haze<sup>3</sup>  
It can never be more beautiful than this]

The pleasure in life seems all the greater because of Balder's knowledge of his own mortality. He appears content to glory in the beauty of the spring day.

Balder's sense of elation is carried through into the second poem of the collection:

"Den blinde truskulda er alltid utan angst" [The blind innocence is always free of fear] (p 7). Balder sees the innocent but blind Hód being prepared by Loke to shoot, and laughingly cries out. However, his protest is not against death in itself, or even the inherent injustice of the situation, but rather against the timing of death

eg ler, ropar -  
Vent! Her er så vakkert!  
Så mykje ennå  
skulle ha vore gjort.

(p 7)

[ I laugh, shout -  
Wait! It is so beautiful here!  
There's so much left  
that should have been done.]

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<sup>3</sup> The word "Dis" - as has already been seen in connection with the name of the character in *Gunnlaðar saga* - has the additional meaning of "goddess" which links it to myth.

The suddenness of death and the sinister nature of the situation is conveyed not through Balder's protest, but through the coldness and brevity of Loke's words which follow:

Stram bogen, seier Loke.  
Slepp pila.

(p 7)

[Draw the bow, says Loke.  
Release the arrow.]

Despite his protest, Balder's death is unavoidable, and the unstoppable cycle of life and death and the Ragnarok which will follow Balder's death, when a wolf will swallow the sun, is alluded to in "Balders bálferd":

men det store hjulet stoggar ikkje, sola blir dratt ned  
og solulvane kryp langs horisonten.

(p 89)

[but the great wheel does not pause, the sun is pulled down  
and the sun-wolves creep along the horizon.]

The third poem in the first section is spoken not through the words of Balder, but by the mistletoe of the title, and this breaks the pattern of each section having only one voice. In a riddle-like manner the plant describes its nature, and its own life cycle which links to the theme of the inevitability of death and the lack of control surrounding its circumstance:

Det kom ein fugl med meg  
vengene var ikkje mine.  
Spira gjorde eg  
i det han la att etter seg.  
Voks gjorde eg

gjennom andre sine røter.  
 Eg står utanom,  
     er meg sjølv, og er med.  
 Poppelen slepper bladene  
     og vintergreinene hylar.  
 Eg står grøn mellom dei  
     som ei sommarleg sky.  
 Eg er organisert, lever og veks  
     som kreft. Derfor  
 kjenner eg kreften si gåte.  
     Dagleg stikk han kraft i Frigg  
 for å blåse livet  
     inn i hennar slitne kropp.  
 Gjødse! på ein tein.  
     Uliv fylt med liv. (p 8)  
 [A bird brought me  
     the wings weren't mine.  
 I shot up  
     in what it left behind.  
 I grew  
     through the roots of others.  
 I stand outside it all,  
     am myself, and am a part of it.  
 The poplar drops its leaves  
     and the winter branches howl.  
 I stand green between them  
     like a summery cloud.  
 I am organised, live and grow  
     like cancer. Therefore  
 I know cancer's riddle.  
     Daily he sticks force into Frigg  
 so as to blow life  
     into her weary body.  
 Manure on a root sucker<sup>4</sup>  
     Unlife filled with life.]

The images connected to the mistletoe are balanced - both positive and negative, and

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that "tein" has the additional meaning of "spindle", which gives the word a mythological connotation through the connection to the spinning goddesses of fate, the Norns. Compare associations with Urd spinning in chapter on *Gunnlarar saga* (see page 143, above).

the last couplet suggests that death is a precondition for life. A more sinister tone is added to the poem with the portrayal of the mistletoe as a parasite. This image becomes particularly relevant in the poems in the subsequent sections voiced by the poet and the factory worker where the theme of the exploitation of people is explored, and the mystical dual nature of the mistletoe also sheds light on the themes in the collection. There is a great sense of paradox in many of the poems, for instance that life, love and the world can be both good and bad, enjoyable and intolerable at one and the same time. This paradoxical nature of life is reflected in the mistletoe:

As neither tree nor shrub it symbolizes that which is neither one nor the other, which, by extension is the realm of freedom from limitation, so that anyone under the mistletoe is free from restrictions, but also free from protection, and re-enters the world of chaos.

(Cooper, 1978: 106)

In the portrayal of the mistletoe in the poem "Det kom en fugl med meg" emphasis is placed on the plant's dependence on the tree, and trees form a leitmotif found in a number of poems in the collection. On the level of mythological allusion, this is connected to the image of the world tree, the ash Yggdrasil, but Obrestad develops the imagery, for example, to the idea of people having roots in the poem "Telemark":

Eg frys, er som eit gammalt tre  
Det har grodd fast  
Røtene kan ikkje flyttast på

(p 50)

[I am cold, am like an old tree  
It has grown solid  
Roots can not be budged]

The trees in the collection referred to by name are (like Yggdrasil) largely deciduous (poplars, cherry trees) and therefore cyclical, and the frequent use of the motif of foliage - which will inevitably fall - emphasises this.

The Balder section is not overtly political, and deals primarily with situations common to the lives of most people, demonstrating the simultaneous ordinariness and extraordinariness of human life. We follow the course of Balder's love for his wife in a number of poems, his feelings at her giving birth "Nå er du her, min mørke song" , [You are now here, my dark song] (p 34), and accompany him on a walk in the Nordic summer "Den hemmelege stranda i den nordiske sommaren" [The secret beach in the Nordic summer] (pp 30 - 33).

However, among the descriptions of life is knowledge of death, and Balder's section also contains a poem marking the death of a friend "Ei siste helsing frå deg til meg" [A final greeting from you to me] (p 42).

This dualistic and paradoxical nature of life is one of the strongest strands running through the first section. In the poem "Vi sat på kaféen" [We sat in the cafe] (p 11), for example, love is seen to be accompanied by happiness and wonder:

Vi sat på kaféen  
 Du såg på meg  
 Eg strauk mi hand  
 over kinnet ditt  
 - Er du glad i meg?  
 - Eg er glad i deg  
 - Og eg i deg  
 Vi kysste kvarandre  
 Det var heilt banalt

Men det var eit under  
 Nå, etterpå  
 har eg tenkt -  
 Kven var det  
 som åpna for oss?

Og gjorde den  
vennlege rørsle  
med handa?

[We sat in the cafe  
You looked at me  
I stroked my hand  
over your cheek  
- Do you love me?  
- I love you  
- And me you  
We kissed each other  
It was totally banal

But it was a miracle  
Now, afterwards  
I have thought -  
Who was it  
that opened up for us?  
And made that  
friendly movement  
of the hand?]

But the poem also leaves open the possibility that the love referred to may have died -  
"Nå, etterpå" [Now, afterwards] - and the disappointment and resignation that can  
accompany love, and life, is clearer in the later poem "Veit ikkje om eg ga deg" (p  
33):

Veit ikkje om eg ga deg  
det du ville  
eg skulle gi, veit ikkje  
om eg ga deg roser  
Nå får du dette  
Her fins det ikkje løgn  
Ikkje bitterhet  
Her fins det  
som vi har gjort

[Don't know if I gave you  
what you wanted  
me to give, don't know



if I gave you roses  
 Now you get this  
 Here are no lies  
 No bitterness  
 Here is what  
 we have done]

Love can be seen to blossom and fade in a cycle, and this cyclic quality of life is reflected not only in the structure of the collection as a whole, but also in the inner structure of the first section: the final poem in the section concerns a child leaving home, and this is referred to as "ein liten død" [a small death] (p 45), the reference to death creating a mini-cycle within the first section.

## POETIC VISION

Alongside the portrayal of life cycles appears the theme of vision - particularly that of lack of vision which has been mentioned in earlier chapters with regard to characters in other works, such as that of Odin in Villy Sørensen's *Ragnarok*. In *Misteltein* the theme is connected not only to the blind Hód, but also to the one-eyed Odin, and to Frigg who is "blind" to the danger of mistletoe, which Obrestad describes as coming from "Frigg sin hage" [Frigg's garden] in "Brått badar lyset over Balder" (p 6). World problems which are described mainly in the poet's section, can also be seen to be problems of lack of vision, and the metaphor of sight comes up repeatedly.

In the poem "Den blinde truskulda er alltid utan angst" [The blind innocence is always free of fear] (p 7) blindness and the accompanying ignorance is portrayed as inherently dangerous. The allusion in the poem "Eg har eit varmt auga" [I have one warm eye] (p 13) to Odin's blind (cold) eye connects the image of sight to perception; the warm

(passionate) eye sees surface finery, and the cold (dispassionate) eye sees beyond the superficial:

Eg har eit varmt auga  
og eit kaldt  
Skal eg sjå på deg med det varme?  
Sjå stasen din og det raude blod?

Skal eg sjå på deg med det kalde?  
Det som ser tvers gjennom  
lakk, fakter, fjas  
Heilt inn. Der lyser  
beingrinda

Du skal vite:  
Eg går gjennom verda  
med åpne augo

[I have one warm eye  
and one cold  
Should I look at you with the warm eye?  
See your finery and red blood?

Should I look at you with the cold eye?  
Which looks straight through  
veneer, gestures, frivolity  
Right inside. There glows  
the skeleton

You should know:  
I go through the world  
with open eyes]

In the poet's section the theme of vision continues, for example in the poem "Sommarhelsing" [Summer greeting] which is, ironically, set in the winter. This poem extends the idea of circularity and duality by emphasising the opposing seasons. The poet is seen clearing his vision by cleaning the window and making his field of

view clearer before setting himself down at his typewriter to look out, and presumably to convey his view to others:

I natt har eg sove godt, Olav  
 Kjende at eg nok kunne skriva eit dikt  
 Og eg sette meg ned  
 kikka ut vindauga  
 Det var støv og skit  
 Ubrukeleg, såg ikkje klart  
 Derfor fylte eg bøtta med lunka såpevatn  
 tok gummihanskane og ein nal  
 ei side med Aftenpostens annonser  
 Det er midt i januar. Ei grad mildt  
 Nå er det blitt så lyst  
 at eg kan slukke lampene  
 Sette meg til maskinen  
 for å sjå ut

(p 52)

[Last night I slept well, Olav  
 Felt that I could probably write a poem  
 And I sat myself down  
 Looked out of the window  
 There was dust and dirt  
 Useless, couldn't see clearly  
 Therefore I filled a bucket with lukewarm soapy water  
 got the rubber gloves and a rag  
 a page of adverts from *Aftenposten*  
 It is the middle of January. One degree above  
 Now it has got so light  
 that I can turn off the lamps  
 Sit myself at the machine  
 to look out]

Implicit in the poem is that his view of the wider world extends beyond the view from his window, for instance through media presentation (of which the description of the page of adverts from the newspaper *Aftenposten* gives a negative slant). This view is processed by, and conveyed through the machine at which he is working. By using the word "maskin" [machine] to describe his typewriter rather than the more normal

"skrivemaskin" [typewriter - literally: "writing machine"] Obrestad draws a parallel between the writer and the worker, and this ties in with his openly political agenda for his writing.

The second section of *Misteltein* in which the above poem is found, contains a number of poems about international politics and the people affected by political events around the world. From his "machine" the poet gives us his insight into events not just in Norway but in places such as Macedonia in "For ein Makedonsk Venn" [To a Macedonian friend] (pp 55-56), Ireland in "Slaktarane møter Bobby Sands" [The butchers meet Bobby Sands] (pp 59-61), and Poland in "Det polske Flagg" [The Polish flag] (p 57).

One of the main criticisms that emerges from these poems is the lack of action against injustice in the world, and the second section as a whole begins with a poem entitled "Fragment av ein syklus"[Fragment of a cycle] (p 47) aimed at those who fail to take responsibility into their own hands:

Eg vil ikkje  
vil ikkje  
ta ansvar  
har ikkje tid  
ikkje råd  
vil ikkje  
tenke på det

I lengre tid  
har eg vakna  
klokka tre  
om morgonen  
og ikkje gjort anna  
enn å tenke

[I will not  
will not  
take responsibility  
don't have time  
don't have the money  
will not  
think about it

For a long time  
I have woken  
three o'clock  
in the morning  
and done nothing  
but think]

In the poem "Som om nedisa" [As if put on ice] (p 49), which follows a few pages later, he warns young people against apathy:

Åh, ungdom, du blir betalt  
med visdom, som utan  
det handlande imperativet  
Kan bli: Resignasjon

[Oh, youth, you are paid  
with wisdom, which without  
the acting imperative  
Can become: Resignation]

Throughout the collection the personal is put back into the political: here we see into the eyes of Manzoor ("Manzoor" p 54) the Pakistani woman who, through an accident of birth, is struggling through life as if "tvers gjennom ein mur" [right through a wall], and attempts to put across the idea that it is our responsibility to do more than just lie awake at night. "Slaktarane møter Bobby Sands" [The butchers meet Bobby Sands] directs the attack at the poet's view of injustice in Ireland, and in a note following the poem Obrestad emphasises the human aspects of the Irish problem:

"Bobby Sands var gift og hadde eit barn" [Bobby Sands was married and had one child]. An extract from an article in *Republican News* from November 25th 1978 is also included, the title of which "The Window in my Mind" links to the theme of internal vision/sight.

The comment on Bobby Sands' personal life is also connected to the theme of cycles within society, which continue through generations, and this sense of responsibility for future generations is also important in the eyes of the poet when he describes political protesters. Describing the hope that creates "eit lys gjennom historia" [a light through history] he goes on to say in "Saltet på jorda" [The Salt of the Earth] (p 58) that fighting for rights "var ikkje bare krava,/men alt det vi hadde sett og samla opp/for å gi vidare til våre barn." [wasn't just the demands,/but all that we had seen and collected/to pass on to our children].

The first section is not political, however, the political side of Balder's character can be seen in the third section ostensibly voiced by the factory worker Schrøder, for example when Balder appears in "Etter det femte nattskiftet" [After the fifth nightshift] (p 66). In this poem, Balder points out that Schrøder has to work overtime in order to make up his wages. The poet of the second section also appears in this section, notably in "Fri" [Free] (p 69) which is discussed below, and the presence of all three men in Schrøder's section increases the sense that the individual poems form a cohesive whole.

In the third section, international problems - wars and inhumane injustice - are more distant, although their presence is felt from the very first poem "Schrøder", when a news report breaks the idyll of the summer day. The injustice touched upon in

Schrøder's section is mainly injustice within Norway. Although Norway is hailed as "Det rikaste landet i verden" [The richest country in the world] (p 68), the poems make it clear that Obrestad does not consider that everyone gets an equal share of the wealth, or luxury: "Kven seier at slitets tidsalder er over" [Who says the time of hard labour has passed] ("Barnelærdom" p 67), although this inequality is shown to be greater on an international scale ("Lønn" [Wages] p 65).

### FATE AND FREEDOM

The first poem in the third section, "Schrøder" (p 63), sees the factory worker standing in a cherry tree. The poem is linked linguistically and thematically to the first poem in the Balder section by Schrøder being physically in a tree, and through the images of fire:

Det er den siste julidagen, sola gneistrar  
 på det blanke morellskalet  
 og tenner tusen soler kring meg der eg står.

[It is the last day of July, the sun sparkles  
 on the shining cherry skin  
 and lights a thousand suns around me where I stand]

In sharp contrast to this idyllic summer scene comes the news on the radio of bombing in Beirut. The lines "endå ingen kastar anna enn sol over oss, her,/ i det grøne Norden", [even though no-one is throwing anything other than sun over us, here/in the green North] allude to the throwing of missiles at the mythical Balder, and also, by the juxtaposition of Scandinavia and unrest, implies that though unrest is not currently taking place in Norway, it could occur in the future, and has done so in the past. A lack of control over his own fate is suggested as Schrøder's personal fortunes are in the hands of "Akkordstyret" [The Management] who



sopar saman restane  
av den store treforedlingsfabrikken eg jobba på

(p 63)

[brush together the remains  
of the big wood processing factory I worked at].

Just as Balder, Schrøder appears to feel a sense of elation from danger; it is unclear whether the branch on which he is standing will hold, but at the same time he seems to be reaching out for something better:

Eg strekker meg  
på tåpissane etter sola.

(p 69)

[I reach up  
on the tips of my toes towards the sun].

The feeling of elation combined with physical danger emerges once again when Schrøder is swimming in the sea, and is unsure whether he can make it back to the shore in "Til venstre ser eg fyrlykta på Østnestangen" [On the left I can see the light-house on Østnestangen] (p 82):

Til venstre ser eg fyrlykta på Østnestangen  
Til høgre ser eg fyrlykta på Vestnestangen  
Beint fram er det åpne havet  
Bak meg: stranda  
Eg er i feltet mellom høgre si framdrift  
og venstre sitt ansvar  
Nå, når eg kryssar linja mellom lyktene  
veit eg: eg er i området  
der eg ikkje lenger veit  
om eg når tilbake

[To the left I can see the light-house on Østnestangen  
To the right I can see the light-house on Vestnestangen

Straight ahead is the open ocean  
 Behind me: the beach  
 I am in the sphere between the right's forward thrust  
 and the left's responsibility  
 Now, when I cross the line between the lights  
 I know: I am in the area  
 where I no longer know  
 if I can make it back]

The poem can also be read on a political level, with the individual being at the mercy of changing tides and currents in politics, and having little control over events that affect his daily life.

The theme of social inequality and injustice where man is dependent on the whim of management or government is extended to the theme of man in nature and at the whim of nature, or fate. Throughout the Schrøder section, politics are seen as an external force affecting the individual on a personal level: being laid off from the factory can be seen to lead to financial and marital problems, for example in "Status" [Status] (p 68) when the bailiff calls on Schrøder, and it is also equated with a double-edged freedom as described in "Fri" [Free]:

Eg er fri  
 på den måten ein har fri  
 når fabrikkken står.  
 "Det varer iallfall 14 dagar  
 til å begynne med"  
 Vi traskar ned gjennom orekrattet  
 poeten og eg, vi har sorger  
 som skal leggest i bløyt  
 Suter som eit sett skitne arbeidsbukser  
 Bløytevatnet har eg på lomma  
 Gløymslewegen mellom askene -  
 - Kor er dama? spurde han  
 - eg såg bilen då eg la meg.  
 - Veit ikkje, svarar eg, - ho tok barna

i bilen og drog. Slik er det nå  
 Uråd å få til noko  
 Uråd å få sammanheng i noko  
 Uråd å vite nokonting om framtida  
 - Det er eit fritt land, sa han  
 Så tok vi oss ein klunk og lo

(p 69)

[I am free  
 to the extent one is free  
 when the factory is shut.  
 "It will last, in any case, 14 days  
 to begin with"  
 We tramp down through the alder thicket  
 the poet and I, we have sorrows  
 which need to be left to soak  
 Anxieties like a pair of dirty work trousers  
 I have the soaking-water in my pocket  
 The Road to Forgetting through the ashes -  
 "Where's the wife?" he asks  
 "I saw the car when I went to bed."  
 "I don't know," I answer. "She took the children  
 in the car and went. That's how it is now  
 Impossible to do anything  
 Impossible to make anything make sense  
 Impossible to know anything about the future"  
 "It's a free country," he said  
 So we took a swig and laughed]

The character of Schrøder attempts to forget his sorrows, through alcohol, as in the poem above, but more often by swimming in the sea which he is portrayed as doing in several of the poems such as "Til venstre ser eg fyrlykta på Østnestangen". When in the water he experiences a releasing sense of indifference: "Ei underleg likesæle i vatnet" [A strange indifference in the water] (p 79), and when he is thrashing about in the metre-high waves he feels free: "sanneleg er eg fri" [truly I am free] (in: "Energien har slått ein sirkel kring kroppen" [The energy has drawn a circle around my body] (p 84)). The indifference he experiences is only lifted by the thought of his children: "Eit einaste spørsmål held me flytande:/Kor skal vel barna mine ta vegen?"

[A single question keeps me afloat:/Where are my children going to go?] (p 81) and this links to earlier references in the cycle to the significance of children and future generations mentioned above.

Schrøder does not give up, but continues to swim, and the connection to swimming, and water can be seen to be a metaphor for Schrøder's life. This becomes apparent in the poem "Eg sym gjennom livet med åpne spørsmål" [I swim through life with open questions] (p 86). "Tenkte aldri på havet" [I never thought about the ocean] (p 87) continues this metaphor:

Tenkte aldri på havet  
 Tenkte alltid havet  
 er der  
 like bortanfor horisonten

[I never thought about the ocean  
 Just thought the ocean  
 is there  
 just beyond the horizon]

Implicit in these lines is the sense that the lack of reflection - along with a feeling that there is something beyond his experience - applies equally to the way Schrøder has gone through life.

The freedom, and simultaneous vulnerability to external control, Schrøder experiences out in the open sea is present in his life as a whole. The element of chance is emphasised in two poems "Eg svingde av den bare hovudvegen" [I turned off the bare main road] (p 70) and "Døden er ein tømmertrailer ned bakken" [Death is a timber truck down a bank] (p 71) the first of which describes a close escape from death:

- det skal ein liten sving  
 bort frå situasjonen du kontrollerer  
 til situasjonen der du er kontrollert,  
 ein svings sekund  
 frå du tronar i beltet,  
 konge over vegen og dine ni liv,  
 til vala dine er umogelege.  
 Og så den svingen  
 som ikkje var nødvendig, ein feil

[- it just takes a small turn  
 away from a situation you can control  
 to a situation where you are controlled,  
 the second of one turn  
 from lording over it in the seat-belt,  
 king of the road and your nine lives,  
 until your choices are impossible.  
 And then that turn  
 which was not necessary, a mistake]

The second of these two poems, in contrast, describes a fatal accident in which the tragedy was not avoided:

Døden er ein tømmertrailer ned bakken  
 i ukontrollert fart.  
 Sjøføren skal klare akkorden.  
 Det han trur han styrer  
 styrer han.

(p 71)

[Death is a timber truck down the bank  
 at uncontrollable speed.  
 The driver has to complete his quota.  
 The thing he thinks he's steering  
 is steering him.]

Just as the driver is "steered" by the truck he is driving, so the daily lives of people are portrayed as being controlled by external forces. In "For det er som på en fest"

[Because it is like at a party] (p 51) "det" [it] - presumably life -is described as being:

som eit spel poker  
 Vi byr opp: fritid og pengar  
 arbeidet, tilliten på jobben  
 ekteskapet, stoltheten, barna  
 si framtid, og vi skal til å satse meir -  
 Då veltar han bordet og ropar  
 Spelet er regissert  
 frå ende til annan?

[like a game of poker  
 We bid: time off and money  
 work, confidence at work,  
 our marriage, pride, the children's  
 future, and we want to bet more -  
 Then he tips over the table and shouts  
 The game is fixed  
 from one end to the other?]

This notion that the fate of the individual, and society, is neither dependent on coincidence, nor self-determined can also be connected to Norse mythology; however, here the determining factor is not the Norns - the goddesses of fate - but market forces against which the individual has just as little control.

By linking the idea of life driven by chance to the mythical notion of fate, and through the work's cyclical structure and mythological imagery, the themes and social critique with the poetry cycle are reinforced by the mythological foundations upon which Obrestad is drawing.

The continuation of unconscious echoes from the Norse past is further alluded to in reference to folk customs that remain to this day in *Misteltein's* final poem "Balders bålferd" which connects the myth of the burning of Balder with the folk traditions

surrounding the summer solstice and the burning of bonfires at mid-summer parties; a tradition originally based on the myth of Balder's death and descent into Hel.

In the next chapter we will see how writer Erling Kittelsen also emphasises the interconnectedness of the past and the present by his juxtaposition of the text of *Völuspá* with his own contemporary response in the poetry cycle *HUN*.



## CHAPTER SEVEN: CULTURAL RAGNAROK

### ERLING KITTELSEN'S *HUN*

The poems in Tor Obrestad's work *Misteltein*, discussed in the previous chapter range from poignant love poems to pointed political diatribes. However, the individual poems stand together as a cohesive body of poetry within the outer framework of poems relating directly to the myth of the god Balder. The characters whose voices emerge in the poems, and the events they relate place the cycle firmly in the late twentieth century, despite the mythological frame. In contrast, the poetry cycle *HUN*, [SHE] (1989) the subtitle of which is "Samtale med våre forfedre" [Conversation with our forefathers] sets up a dialogue in which the past and the present both participate.

Of all the works discussed in this thesis, *HUN* demonstrates the most extreme example of intertextuality. Kittelsen juxtaposes the text of the epic Eddic poem *Völuspá* with his own annotated translation and poetic response. This response to the ancient poem builds upon and reflects its power, exploring beyond it in a way that transposes its themes of social collapse to the modern day.

Kittelsen has a long held fascination for Scandinavian myth. His university dissertation from 1974 is entitled *Den norrröne skapelsesmytologi, en fenomenologisk studie* [The Norse Myth of Creation, a Phenomenological Study]. His subsequent authorship spanning poetry, plays and fantastical prose for children and adults is highly intertextual - his texts enter a dialogue with other texts such as the *Poetic Edda* and the works of Henrik Wergeland, and also with each other.

Kittelsen's work is both fundamentally Nordic in his choice of intertexts and frequent depiction of nature, but also - as Norwegian scholar Lars Sætre has pointed out - highly international in style, particularly with regard to his experimentation with form. Sætre describes his use of the mythical material as

slett ikkje (...) eit endeframt restaurerings- arbeid med tanke på formidling til ettertida. For det er nettopp den stivna tradisjonssamanhengen diktaren eksplosivt *utfordrar*. Han tolkar myten på sin måte, vektlegg element som tradisjonen har halde for perifere, plukkar i stykker og ut av myten for å setje ein mytiskallegorisk samanheng opp i ny lyssetjing. (Sætre, 1991: 23)  
[not at all (...) a straight-forward work of restoration with a mind to passing it on to the future. Because it is just that stiff context of tradition that the poet explosively challenges. He interprets the myth in his own way, emphasising elements which tradition has considered peripheral, pulls to pieces and out of the myth to set a mytho-allegoric context up in a new light.]

Of all Kittelsen's work this approach comes through most powerfully in *HUN* where the reader is challenged to re-examine the epic Eddic poem *Völuspá*.

### THE SIBYL'S PROPHECY - *VÖLUSPÁ* IN *HUN*

*HUN* is structured according to the verses of *Völuspá* with the poem, translation and response, running parallel to each other throughout, and intricate and tightly woven strands of thought and images run through the different text levels. By laying open the intertextual ploy used and in giving the entire text of *Völuspá*, the work can be seen to be unique.

As mentioned in the introductory section (pages 14-18), *Völuspá* is one of the most revered poems in the Scandinavian literary tradition; the universal, existential themes it contains are compelling even one thousand years after its composition. On one

level, *HUN* is a clear homage to *Völuspá* on the part of the author, and the prominence the Eddic poem is given within the work is also a challenge to the reader to read it anew, and with fresh eyes. On another level, an understanding of *Völuspá* is also a central element to a critical reading of Kittelsen's response.

Kittelsen unconventionally mixes verses from all three extant versions, and his interpretative translation of the poem has a total of sixty-four verses. Following her call to silence the sibyl - unwillingly summoned by Odin who fears Ragnarok and wishes to know what the future holds - begins her pronouncement. Her credibility as a prophetess rests on her knowledge of the secrets of the past especially of the creation, and, in order to gain the audience's confidence in her prophetic skills, the sibyl builds a picture of the Norse view of the cosmos. She describes how the land was raised up out of the sea by Odin and his brothers, how the first humans were created from logs, and so on. The sibyl continues, describing to her audience the way in which the golden age of the gods is disturbed by the entrance of the three giant maidens:

10     Sitting in meadows,    smiling over gameboards,  
        they never knew    any need of gold,  
        but there came three maidens monstrous to look at,  
        giant daughters    of Jotunheim.

(*Elder Edda*, 1991: 2)

The giantesses' appearance seems to act as a catalyst for the introduction of injustice and avarice into the world of the gods. There is war between the Vaner and the Aeser, and despite the subsequent peace treaty, a pattern of violence is established and the gods begin to fight the giants, and the sorceress Gullveig is burnt three times (cf. Lindgren's Gullveig, see pages 117- 119 above):

- 11     She remembers war,    the first in the world.  
          Countless spears    were cast at Gullveig,  
          her body burned    in Odin's hall;  
          three times burned,    three times born,  
          again and again,    yet even now alive.

(*Elder Edda*, 1991: 2)

The gods break their oaths to the giants, and their corrupted nature is an essential cause of their predestined downfall. The ethical content of the poem, where moral decadence can be seen to lead to physical destruction, is one of the most powerfully relevant aspects of the poem to this day.

Anticipating Ragnarok, Odin gathers his forces and the death of Balder is to be followed by social collapse. The sibyl describes how:

- 32     Brothers will die,        slain by their brothers,  
          kinsmen betray    their close kin;  
          woe to the world then,    wedded to whoredom,  
          battle-axe and sword rule,    split shields asunder,  
          storm-cleft age of wolves    until the world goes down,  
          only hatred    in the hearts of men.

(*Elder Edda*, 1991: 5)

The last verses of the poem describe the collapse of world order: the baying of the hound Garm, and the crowing of the cockerels are ominous portents of what is to come. The world is thrown into an extended period of winter and darkness, and finally catastrophic destruction is brought about by the giants who attack the Aser in three divisions: Hrym and Loki from the east, and Sutr, with his weapon of fire, from the south. Fenrir, the wolf, breaks loose, the world tree burns, gods are killed, and the earth sinks into the sea. However, despite the extent of destruction at Ragnarok, the sibyl sees beyond this to a time of renewal. Although most of the Aser have

perished, the gods who had died innocent - among them Balder and his unwitting killer, his blind brother Hoder - survive to emerge as new leaders of the gods, and the earth rises once again from the ocean.

*Völuspá* is often read as having a golden "resurrection-like" ending. However, the final verse suggests that cyclic re-birth also implies cyclic death, or destruction as in the sky:

50    There comes the dark    dragon flying,  
       flashing upward from Nidafells;  
       on wide swift wings    it soars above the earth,  
       carrying corpses. Now she will sink down.

(*Elder Edda*, 1991: 8)

The poem as a whole does not build up a sense of motive or character, as Snorri does in his *Edda* and as the writers of the Icelandic sagas tend to do, instead individual scenes are presented separately in sequence displaying more in common with visual arts than with story telling, and a dramatic series of images is built up, and this style has been adopted by Kittelsen in his response to the poem.

The power of the poem comes from the immediacy of the imposing images which are reeled out one after another by the poet. Sigurdur Nordal describes the poem as being:

on the end of the world, and that seen not as a distant vision but as an  
 overhanging actuality. (Nordal, 1970-73: 113)

This urgency which runs through the poem is as relevant today as when *Völuspá* was composed. The possible influence on the poem of Christian concepts has been

discussed in the introductory section, for instance the post-Ragnarok renewal, and the death and subsequent resurrection of an innocent god, seem to suggest that even if the poet had been raised a heathen, he (or she) was familiar with Christian beliefs and traditions, and that the poem should therefore be dated around the tenth century. The social/cultural shift portrayed in *Völuspá* can be seen to be equally relevant to the present day, in which it can be argued that a dramatic shift is occurring away from the dualistic moral codes traditionally associated with the Christian church, and the aspect of cultural shift present in the poem is highlighted by Vera Henriksen in her novel *Ravn og Due* (see above, Chapter Five).

Despite the presence of Christian ideas, Herman Pálsson argues that the poem has its origins in shamanistic ritual, explaining the sibyl's reference to herself in the third person in later verses as she becomes detached from her self, and an element of her vision (Pálsson, 1996). The detachment or fragmentation of "self" which this theory emphasises is of particular significance in an interpretation of the poem in the context of Erling Kittelsen's *HUN* as emphasis is placed on the detached presence of the "she" of the title throughout.

As well as providing a poetic and thematic base for Kittelsen's work, *Völuspá* gives *HUN* a firm structure, and as has been mentioned above, the text is divided according to the verses of *Völuspá*.

Within the sets of verses there are no page numbers. This increases the sense that the different levels of the text stand together. Kittelsen stresses, however, in his epilogue to *HUN* that:



Delene danner ikke noen sluttet enhet, meningen er at enhver kan gå inn der det gir mest.

[The parts do not form a finished whole, the idea is that anyone can enter where they find it most rewarding.]

Although the poetic response can be read as a work in its own right, the translation and footnotes allow more information about the intertexts to be given and thereby shed a certain degree of light on his modern response. It is common practice in academic translations to have both the original and the translation alongside each other, and the inclusion can be seen to be in this tradition. In addition they reveal the author's ideas and train of thought. The intellectual discussion of sources in the footnotes also serves to emphasise the uncertainty surrounding the origin and authenticity of particular myths and sources and thus makes the ancient text more open to challenge and creative re-use of this kind.

As a translation, Kittelsen's *Völuspá* is untraditional. He describes his approach in the epilogue to *HUN*:

Jeg har vært igjennom en del måter å oversette Edda-dikt på. Mitt første Voluspå-utkast i 1971 var metrisk ubundet og opptatt av en visjon jeg manglet begrepsapparat for. Etter hvert ble de metriske virkemiddel en måte å holde fast en tolkning. I 1983 hadde jeg en gjendiktning med alt det metriske i orden. Visjon sto nå passe på tverke som en påminnelse det var noe annet jeg lette etter.

Først ved å være noe mindre konsekvent i å gjennomføre all Edda-metrikkenes krav og gjenvinne en presisjon med andre klangforhold i moderne norsk, fikk jeg språk og mitt eget erkjennelsesarbeid til å løpe sammen.

[I have tried a number of ways of translating Eddic poetry. My first *Völuspá*-draft in 1971 was not metrically bound, and preoccupied with a vision I lacked the conceptual apparatus for. After I while the metrical tools became a way of holding together an interpretation. In 1983 I had



a reinterpretation complete with the correct metres. Vision now stood in the way as a reminder that there was something else I was looking for.

It was only when I started to be less consistent in obeying all the Eddic metrical rules and regained a precision with other relationships between sounds in modern Norwegian that I managed to make the language and my own understanding come together.]

While he is open about his move away from strict Eddic meter, he is less explicit about his occasional move away from literal/accepted meanings within the Old Norse version. If one examines the first verse of Kittelsen's translation we see how, in the manner of a scald, the sibyl calls her audience to silence:

Stille så det lyder  
for alle levende  
barn av Heimdal  
Høyt og lavt  
vil du, Valfar  
jeg går ut med  
første innsikt  
folk husker.

[Silent so it resounds  
for all living  
children of Heimdall  
High and low  
will you, Val-father  
that I start with  
the first knowledge  
people remember.]

Comparison with the Old Norse text which Kittelsen includes:

Hlióds bid ek allar  
helgar kindir  
meiri ok minni  
mogo Heimdalar:  
vildo at ek, Valfodr  
vel fyr telia

forn spioll fira  
pau er fremst um man.

[Hear my words, you holy gods,  
great men and humble sons of Heimdall;  
by Odin's will, I'll speak the ancient lore,  
the oldest of all that I remember.<sup>1</sup>]

shows that he moves away from the Old Norse in some of his choice of wording. The word "levende" [living] used by Kittelsen, which points the poem to a living (contemporary) audience is not present in the Old Norse, and there is no academic justification for Kittelsen's choice of wording in the final line which refers in the Old Norse to the speaker's memory, and not to that of the people.

To see exactly how Kittelsen differs from the norm in his approach to translation, it is interesting to compare his version to Ludvig Holm-Olsen's 1975 translation which in many ways can be seen to be the Norwegian standard:

Hør meg i taushet  
hellige ætter,  
høye og lave  
Heimdalls sønner;  
Valfar, du ønsket  
jeg ville fortelle  
det gamle budskap  
som best jeg mins.

The language used by Holm Olsen is clearly more antiquated in style, and of particular significance to a critical comparison of the two, is Kittelsen's use of the inclusive "Heimdalls barn" [Heimdall's children]. Holm-Olsen's less 'politically correct' "Heimdalls sønner" [Heimdall's sons] can be seen, however, to hold more closely to

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<sup>1</sup> The format of Eddic poems in English is different to that used generally in Scandinavia, and this is demonstrated by comparison between Holm-Olsen's and Terry's translations.

the Old Norse. Subsequent verses translated by Kittelsen contain similarly altered lines, and he consistently leaves out the conventional punctuation (used by Holm-Olsen).

From an academic point of view these points would weaken the translation. However, Kittelsen's interpretative version of *Völuspá* is arguably in keeping with the early Eddic tradition. Sigurdur Nordal writes:

The tales of gods grew like wild flowers. Every poet was permitted to alter them or add to them, and the way was open to influences from other religions. (Nordal, 1970-73: 108)

An important and positive aspect of the freeing of *Völuspá* from pseudo-archaic language is that it gives the reader a new insight into the work and allows the translation to be more consistently linked linguistically with Kittelsen's new poem. The decreased formal rigidity between the three poetic texts can also be seen to represent one of the themes within the poem: the idea of structural collapse.

In an article in *Dagbladet*, Kittelsen was criticised for deconstructing *Völuspá* (Tønseth, 1990), and his loose approach to translation of the poem probably lies behind such criticism. In his reply to the article (Kittelsen, 1990), Kittelsen refutes this, saying rather that:

det er vår oppfatning av Voluspá som er dekonstruert og havarert i fastlåste brokker i vår bevissthet.  
[it is our understanding of *Völuspá* that is deconstructed and shipwrecked in locked-in fragments in our consciousness.]

His intention is to free the impulses latent in *Völuspá* (arguably itself an interpretation, and not a core text as such) and expand the poem's horizon, and this he most certainly achieves.

While reviews of Erling Kittelsen's work were occasionally critical, other reviewers were enthusiastic about the work as a whole, and the style of the translation in particular which Hanna Elgvin describes as "herlig frisk" [wonderfully fresh] (Elgvin, 1990). Comparing Kittelsen's translation of *Voluspá* to Ludvig Holm-Olsen's authoritative 1975 version, Geir Mork in his review of *HUN* speaks enthusiastically for Kittelsen's approach:

Kittelsen er ikke en mindre, men derimot en ganske annen slags gjendikter. Han løsner på slipset kunne en si; slipper diktet løs fra det monumentale uten at alvoret glipper. Ordregisteret utvides og med det assosiasjonsmulighetene uten at den poetiske konsentrasjonen går dukken. Det mest karakteristiske er kanskje humoren som stadig sprenger seg inn og gir hittil utenkte åpninger. (Mork, 1990)  
 [Kittelsen is not a lesser, but rather quite a different type of translator. One could say that he loosens his tie; releases the poem from the monumental without losing the seriousness. The register is expanded and with it the possibilities for associations - without abandoning the poetic intensity. Perhaps most characteristic is the humour, which constantly pushes its way in and produces hitherto unimagined possibilities.]

Illustrating how Kittelsen "loosens his tie", Mork compares Holm-Olsen's translation of verse VIII's "... þursa meýiar/ámátkar miök/ór iötunheimom" which reads "til tre trollsterke/tussemøyer/kom fram til æser/fra Jotunheim" [until three troll-strong/giant maidens/came forth to the Aser/from Jotunheim] with Kittelsen's "til det kom/tre skrepper/inderlig mektige/fra Jotunheimen" [until there came/three bits of skirt/intensely powerful/from Jotunheim].

Kittelsen's interpretation of *Völuspá*, which starts within his translation, continues within his poetic response. In this Kittelsen draws heavily on characters and images from Eddic poems and mythological sources other than *Völuspá*. In many cases the initiated reader will make the connection for him/herself. The figures of Njord and Skade who are included by Kittelsen in verse II, for instance, do not appear in *Völuspá*. At times, however, Kittelsen does expand on mythological allusions in the poem within the footnotes to the translation. For example in Verse I he explains that Heimdal is said to be:

stamfar til menneskene med tre kvinner: Edda (oldemor), Amma  
(bestemor) og Mor.  
[progenitor to humankind with three women: Edda (great-grandmother),  
Amma (grandmother) and Mother.]

Ostensibly this note explains the fact that *Völuspá* is addressed to "alle levende barn av Heimdal" [all living children of Heimdal], that is - all human beings, and also explains the lines in the new poem:

i den første hukommelse blant folk  
regnet Heimdal som sin stamfar.  
[in people's first memory  
counted Heimdal as their progenitor]

In addition, by emphasising this reference, Kittelsen also emphasises that *Völuspá* is still addressed to all people.

In the poetic response to *Völuspá* the mood of the epic poem is carried through, and Kittelsen builds up images of the state of the world in a similar filmatic manner to *Völuspá*. These become increasingly violent and disturbing as the work progresses in parallel to the images in *Völuspá*. The use of language in his poetic response creates a complex and sometimes fragmented stream of consciousness, and while the free flow of ideas and images can be compared to the style of *Völuspá*, it also makes for a challenging text.

Although Kittelsen breaks with Eddic form - in both his translation, and his poetic response - he has adopted some stylistic features which echo Eddic poetry in his new poem, for example he creates modern *heiti* and *kennings* which connect modern items to the poetic subject. These appear most noticeably in the lists of boat names which are placed with the lists of names of dwarfs, which are often omitted from editions of *Völuspá*. For example in verse XI:

En slangehale av båter i spenn forbi  
 vestspissen av Danmark, dyngervis  
 av kampesteiner, kjempemolo Hanstholm  
 inne for å hvile: Margarethe  
 og polarkutteren Muffe, sleperen Mjølner  
 skøytene Østbank, Rosa, Klyden, Karsten  
 hjemmelaget Bø, Debora fra hvide sande  
 Mini-Rikki, Tilda Trilling, Anguilla, Speso  
 og Kristian Laban - seilskuta Wilfred  
 og prammen Medbox på andre sida, Kocks Bremen  
 Michael Morsing og kjempetråleren Sunbeam  
 Sakki, Freddy, Calypso og Westbank fra hver  
 sin himmelretning, Jopi, Smurt, Passat  
 Ramona, Eke, Ponny på land og Hvalpsund  
 for dokk, Tott, Barske, Kiwi og Jenny overalt  
 Trille, Bølge, Nikita, Linka, Bolette  
 Elektra, Elisabeth, sleperen Anita Heiselberg  
 Mette Michael og Kenneth Karina  
 Statoil Kappa, BP Gerda, Kuwait 10

butter i fortøyningen: sjekta hun satt  
 Tyrving ut av dvale  
 Lisa rød balje full av fisk.

[A snake-tail of boats stretched past  
 the west tip of Denmark, heaps  
 of boulders, huge break waters Hanstholm  
 in to rest: Margarethe  
 and the arctic cutter Muffe, the tug Mjølner  
 the fishing smacks Østbank, Rosa, Klyden, Karsten  
 home-made Bø, Debora from white sand  
 Mini-Rikki, Tilda Trilling, Anguilla, Speso  
 and Kristian Laban - the sailing ship Wilfred  
 and the barge Medbox on the other side, Kocks Bremen  
 Michael Morsing and the giant trawler Sunbeam  
 Sakki, Freddy, Calypso and Westbank each from  
 their own direction, Jopi, Smurt, Passat  
 Ramona, Eke, Pony on land and Hvalpsund  
 for dock, Tott, Barske, Kiwi and Jenny all over the place  
 Trille, Bølge, Nikita, Linka, Bolette  
 Elektra, Elisabeth, the tug boat Anita Heiselberg  
 Mette Michael and Kenneth Karina  
 Statoil Kappa, BP Gerda, Kuwait 10  
 ramming the moorings: she put out the fishing boat  
 Tyrving out of hibernation  
 Lisa red tub full of fish.]

The variety of words for different kinds of boats can be seen to serve the same function as *heiti*, being more poetic than "skip" [ship], or "båt" [boat] while still being easily recognisable. In verse XII some of the boat names, for example "Arctic tern" and "Orcades Viking", can be compared to *kennings*; maybe emphasising in the same way a particular attribute of the boat in question. Among the innocent sounding boat names there also lurks a number of political allusions ("Westbank", "Nikita" etc). A similar familiar modern *kenning* is found in verse XXV, among the list of place names: the description for the Soviet Union - "Storebror" [Big Brother].



This use of *kennings* and *heiti* can be seen to challenge the mystic quality we attribute to the poetic words and circumlocutions from the Viking era. Just as we can understand different terms for different boats, so the words of 1000 years' ago are likely to have been equally as straightforward, and so in 1000 years' time our ways of defining, and naming, everyday objects will probably seem just as incomprehensible.

### GIVING THE VOICELESS A VOICE

The sense of the inter-connectedness (though not always continuity) between ideas and works is increased by intertextuality between Erling Kittelsen's works. Just as the seeress in *Völuspá* is speaking 1000 years in the past, and her counterpart in Kittelsen's companion poem is placed in the modern day, one of the two characters from Kittelsen's play *Utesveveren* ["The outside hoverer"] (1991) is a homeless woman 1000 years in the future and mirrors the two earlier female figures all of whom can be seen to be female outsiders.

By calling the book *HUN* - "She" - Kittelsen directs the reader's attention not just at the seeress's prophecy, but also towards the woman behind the words. The title and the use of the third person to refer to the seeress also builds on a change in perspective that is already taking place by the end of *Völuspá*, where the voice "ek" [I] becomes the impersonal "hón" [she], and in places she can be seen to be both the narrator and the subject. On another level this change in perspective is significant as she loses her voice (Mork, 1990). The sibyl might no longer speak but she sees: she is present in all but one of the verses observing events.

By choosing to use a female perspective Kittelsen portrays a social outsider excluded economically ("she" is apparently poor), racially ("she" is apparently a giant), and sexually. Her lack of name, and therefore a positive identity, gives her an added universality. (This namelessness/universality can also be found in the mother figure in *Gunnlaðar saga*, see above Chapter Four).

"She" can be viewed as a sexually exploited woman; Dagny Kristjansdóttir describes her as:

kanskje en prostituert, kanskje en uteligger (som volven i 'Voluspá' som "sitter ute" da Odin får henne i sin makt med blikket). Hun er et sosialt objekt, en utstøtt, en som tilhører grenselandet, og derfor rår hun over viten som æserne både frykter og begjærer.

(Kristjansdóttir, 1993: 23)

[possibly a prostituted woman, or someone sleeping rough (like the 'volve' in *Voluspá* who "is sitting out" when Odin gets her in his power with his glance). She is a social object, an outcast, someone belonging to the borderland, and therefore she possesses knowledge which the Aser both fear and desire.]

As a witch-like prophetess, the seeress is inevitably a sensual figure, but the sexuality "she" encounters in *HUN* is violent and exploitative, and there are clear suggestions of rape, or prostitution, in Verse XLII:

Hun har vasket pusset av seg, blod  
de ikke satte størst pris på  
alle som ville inn i henne  
trengte henne i avgjørende øyeblikk  
da de famlet og ga seg hen og fiklet....

[She has washed cleaned herself up, blood  
they didn't value highly  
everyone who wanted to enter her  
needed her in a decisive moment

when they fumbled and abandoned themselves and fiddled..]

The juxtaposition of the powerful with the powerless is increased by the passive role "she" has throughout, and her passivity is another element of her namelessness. While "she" is present throughout the poem, she is a spectator of events, and like the seeress "she" does not appear to attempt to avert them even though it is clear that "she" could, but perhaps only by resorting to equal levels of violence. In Verse XXV, which describes wars around the world - civil wars, religious wars, wars between political opponents - we hear that "et blikk hun sendte varmere enn helvete/ville brent det opp" [a glance she sent warmer than hell/ would have burnt it up].

The idea of the seeress becoming a voiceless spectator is increased by the numerous references to television, "12 kanalers vold/og sex og kommentarer" [12 channels' violence/and sex and commentaries] (Verse XXXI), "alt/er like bra sendt gjennom 144 kanaler" [everything/is just as good transmitted through 144 channels] (Verse XLI); "144 rasjonelle kanaler" [144 rational channels] (Verse XLV) and so on.

The text is highly visual: Kittelsen's (and possibly also the typographer's) concern for the aesthetic is evident from the obvious care taken over the visual impact of the book, for example through the use of four different typefaces for the different strands of the text. In addition, the book contains twenty-one pictures of relics from churches which were first included in the paperback edition. Verse 38, for instance, is preceded by a picture of a crucifix from Våler Church in Østfold (illustration XX, page 222). Spread throughout the book, these add an additional visual dimension and remind the reader of the possible/probable influence of Christianity on the writer of *Völuspá* and vice versa, as many of them have clear heathen influence such as the carving from a post in Hegge Church in Valdres, preceding Verse XLI (illustration XXI, page 223).

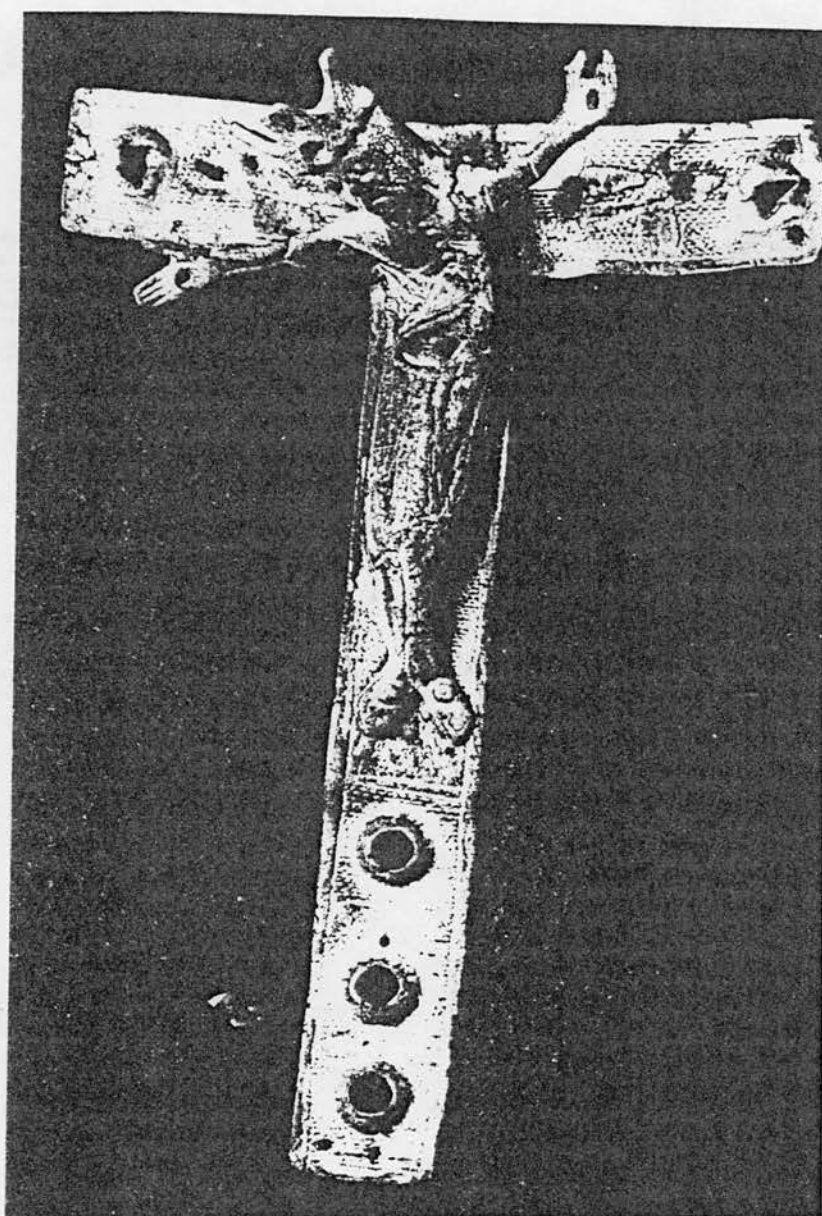


Illustration XX.

Photographs of artefacts from churches alongside the text in Erling Kittelsen's *HUN* alludes to possibility of Christian influence on *Völuspá*. The picture shows a crucifix from Våler Church in Østfold, Norway.



Illustration XXI.

This picture from Erling Kittelsen's *HUN* of a carved post from Hegge Church in Valdres shows the one-eyed god, Odin, and demonstrates the heathen influence on the early Christian church in Norway.

Biblical images are also included in Kittelsen's poem reminding the reader of the clash of belief systems then and now, and among the violent images in the build up to the climax of Ragnarok is the image of "et spydhull i sida" [a spearhole in his side] (Verse XLI).

Despite the references to religion, and the doom-laden images with which the reader is confronted, *HUN* does not provide moral judgements for the reader. The text, unlike the poems of *Misteltein*, does not exhort us to take action and does not suggest that we can make the world a better place. As such it presents a bleaker impression of the fragmented and unequal state of the world in which there is a constant conflict between centre and periphery. This conflict can be seen to be represented by the relationship between Njord and Skade as portrayed in Verse II:

Njord og Skade på kryssfart over Heimdals  
 klient i verdensrommet: jorda i krampegråt  
 skritter de over uten å bli hengt  
 sover ni netter i havna hos Njord  
 ni netter på snaufjellet hos Skade  
 kompassnål i en villgjessplog  
 styrer kjærlig runder bakken, endelig  
 havgapet! tenker han, forferdelig måkeskrik  
 tenker hun og skimter treet  
 med Heimdals hode-topp i kronen; skal han ha  
 en større pott av æren for det hele?  
 Lavt innvendig før treet spratt i fotsporet  
 sover Njord, hører hun det buldrer ut.

[Njord and Skade on a voyage across Heimdals  
 client in space: the earth in convulsive tears  
 they stride across without hanging  
 sleep nine nights at the harbour at Njord's  
 nine nights on the mountain plateau at Skade's  
 compass needle flying like wild geese  
 steer fondly rounding the hill, finally  
 the mouth of the fjord! he thinks, dreadful gull shrieks



she thinks and glimpses the tree  
 with the top of Heimdal's head in the crown; should he have  
 a greater share of honour for it all?  
 Softly inwards before the tree sprouted in the track  
 Njord sleeps, she hears it roaring out.]

A picture of alienation in modern society is presented, alongside "her" own isolation comes this portrayal of Njord and Skade's marriage - where neither can be happy in the other's environment - which can be seen to epitomise the conflict/division both between giants and gods and between men and women. This seemingly fundamentally irresolvable social division is mirrored by the physical division in the world. Division between the land in the centre and the peripheral (but essential) and defiled (polluted/exploited) surrounding body of water (the female element) constitutes the central conflict in the work. Looking again at Verse XI we see that many of the boats are exploiting the sea's resources - they are either connected to fishing or to the oil industry, and by Verse XV the fairly general allusions to the destruction of the ocean ("Statoil Kappa, BP Gerda, Kuwait 10") are made explicit:

Aur-Jord-Båten, Skarven, Zorba  
 Pir, Turi, Scorpio, Sluket, Nanna  
 med kraft til grobunn  
 i Klode-Potta, Njords Krukke  
 det tar ni netter å vanne;  
 hvis det lønner seg å la være  
 tar det nitti niår  
 å få det til å gro igjen.

[Soil-Earth-Boat, The Cormorant<sup>2</sup>, Zorba  
 Mackerel, Turi, Scorpio, The Abyss, Nanna  
 with power for fertile soil  
 in the Melting Pot, Njord's Crock

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<sup>2</sup> "Skarven" can mean both "the cormorant" and "the scoundrel".



it takes nine nights to water,  
 and if it pays to stop  
 it takes ninety nine-years  
 to get it to grow again.]

For both Obrestad and Kittelsen the metaphor of water is central, and although in *Misteltein* Schröder's ocean is primarily a metaphor for life, Obrestad also points out the pollution the ocean is subject to, calling it a "dreneringssystem" [drainage system](p 74).

There are a number of significant similarities between the two works. Despite the different form and content of the works, both present pictures of an unequal and fragmented world. However, Obrestad is working from an openly socialist viewpoint - both in his openly stated policy for his writing, and in the view of the world his work presents. Despite the circularity in *Misteltein* itself: the protesters portrayed are fighting for a better life for future generations within the context of a historical continuum. Although the result of Ragnarok in *HUN* can be seen to lead to a change of the centre of power - from the centre to the former periphery - this is not part of a historical "one-way" process, but can be viewed as an inevitable consequence of the cyclical nature of events, and this is described by Lars Sætre as a cultural Ragnarok (Sætre, 1991). However, although change can not be seen to take place from an essentially moral point of view in *HUN*, the effect of the poem is to demonstrate the hopelessness of social division and fragmentation.

Kittelsen's work is highly unusual and ambitious. The project apparently took over twenty-five years, and could be viewed as audacious. However, by showing us his sibyl's *vision* in parallel to the sibyl's prophecy contained in *Völuspá* he forces the

## CHAPTER EIGHT: AVERTING RAGNAROK

### MYTH AND MORALITY FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Previous chapters have discussed the intertextual use of Norse myth in literature aimed principally at adults. In this final chapter of literary analysis a number of works aimed primarily at children and young people will be examined.

Material from folklore is particularly prevalent in literature for children and young people. Fairy stories, folk tales and myths form children's earliest literary experiences (Sullivan, 1992) and are an element of the process of socialisation. American academic Jack Zipes, in the introduction to *Don't Bet on the Prince* - a book relating contemporary feminist fairy tales from Britain and North America - describes how stories and fairy tales influence children, and the statement applies equally to myths:

it has been demonstrated by psychologists and educators time and again that stories and fairy tales do influence the manner in which children conceive the world and their places in it even before they begin to read (...) story characters become part of a child's 'real world' and form part of their cultural heritage.  
(Zipes, 1987: xii)

Looking back at the elements of myth that have been employed in the works presented above, reveals that the subjects within them range from murder, rape, incest, orgies, and love to the end of the world. Many of the stories contained within the *Eddas* (for instance, the creation of the world from the mutilated body of the giant Ymir, described in Snorri's *Prose Edda*) seem better suited for re-use in 'video nasties' than in books for children. To a certain extent, however, the most explicit violence in

the Norse myths is similar to the "cartoon" violence of the sort served to young people and children on a daily basis - Thor kills giants with a boomerang action hammer, and the army of dead soldiers in Valhalla kill each other daily, only to later pick themselves up off the battle field to feast all night and start the whole process the next day.

While an individual author might exaggerate or play down a particular element, the range of subjects - the violence and sexuality - are all present in the Eddic texts.

Where authors consider them too graphic, omission of detail is common. In Jan-Erik Ebbestad's account of Thor's visit to the giant Geirrød [Geirrod], for example, in the collection *Norrøne myter* [Norse Myths] (1993), Ebbestad omits to mention violence carried out by Tor. The story describes how Tor is trying to cross a river and how Gjalp [Gialp], the giant's daughter, is making the river rise by the unconventional method of urinating into it. Ebbestad writes:

Tor oppdaget at Gjalp, datteren til Geirrød, sto oppe i en fjellkløft, skrevs over elven. Det var hun som var årsak til at vannet steg.

Han kom seg over til den andre siden, fikk tak i et rognetre og dro seg opp på land.

(Ebbestad, 1993: 58)

[Thor discovered that Gjalp, Geirrod's daughter, stood above in a mountain cleft, right across the river. She was the reason that the water was rising.

He got over to the other side, grabbed hold of a rowan tree and pulled himself up on to land.]

Comparison with Snorri's version shows that he has left out one detail:

Then Thor saw up in a certain cleft that Geirrod's daughter Gialp was standing astride the river and she was causing it to rise. Then Thor took up out of the river a great stone and threw it at her and said:

'At its outlet must a river be stemmed.'

He did not miss what he was aiming at, and at that moment he found himself close to the bank and managed to grasp a sort of rowan-bush and thus climbed out of the river. (Snorri, 1987: 82)

Such attempts to "clean up" the myths for a family audience are nothing new, and Ebbestad's omission seems fairly moderate in comparison to the approach taken by the authors of an English publication from the early twentieth century, *Children's Stories from the Northern Legends*. Authors M Dorothy Belgrave and Hilda Hart keep Freyja's sexuality away from the innocent eyes of children, and turn her into a victim of the dwarfs' unsolicited advances (see book illustration, page 232). In order to get the object of her desire, the necklace Brisingamen, Freyja has to tell the dwarfs she loves them, and they force her to kiss them:

Freyja tried to escape and fought to push them from her, yet all the time she held tightly to the necklace, caring more about that than the shameful insult she was enduring from her slaves and enemies.

(Belgrave and Hart, 1922: 25)

This gives a different slant to the story than Loki's accusation of Freyja in *Lokasenna* relating to the same story:

all the elves and Æsir assembled here  
have had you for a whore

(*Elder Edda*, 1991: 77)

While one could argue that Belgrave and Hart's version is a dated attempt to alter the goddess's character to fit in with a narrow view of female chastity, modern retellings



Illustration XXII. From *Children's Stories of the Northern Legends*.

Harry G Theaker's pre-war portrayal of the goddess Freyja is positively demure as she ventures into the dwarf's cave in search of the necklace Brisingamen.



FREYJA IN THE DWARFS' CAVE.  
From "Freyja's Necklace."

and intertextual use of mythology for children and young people are also influenced by an author's values and ideological beliefs. Zipes argues that we have focused on the wrong aspects of tales when we examine their possible impact on children and suggests we should examine

social relations and psychological behaviour first - the very stuff which constitutes the subject matter of the tales - both the proponents and opponents of fairy tales have based and continue to base their criticism on the harsh scenes and sexual connotations of the tales, supposedly suitable or unsuitable for children. (Zipes, 1987: 1)

It is, therefore, the subtext of the stories and the messages these send children and young people about cultural assumptions concerning the subjects portrayed, and not the portrayal of sex or violence *per se*, that should be examined when one undertakes a critical reading of the presentation of mythology for children/young people.

What creates a qualitative difference in the portrayal of Norse myth in literature for children, compared to that by authors aiming their work at adults, is that while crises are also portrayed these are set against the demand in literature for young people for a *happy ending*. As a result, the crisis/Ragnarok is usually averted giving the works concerned a different ideological subtext, effectively affirming the social structures portrayed.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Hollindale's article, "Ideology and the Children's Book" which discusses surface and passive ideology within children's literature, and specifically the implications of happy endings (Hollindale, 1992).

## IDEOLOGY IN HISTORY BOOKS AND TEXT-BOOKS FOR CHILDREN

The texts described so far have been largely fictional, although some contain within the fiction a didactic and/or moralistic intent, with Villy Sørensen and Svava Jakobsdóttir, for example, demanding a re-reading of the myths, and Tor Obrestad also having a clearly programmatic approach to his authorship. The implicit pedagogical aim in these works becomes more explicit in presentations of Norse myth in literature for children. As this is particularly true of history books and text-books, it is worth digressing slightly from the general remit of this study to briefly examine these.

The Viking era is of particular importance to Scandinavians: the power and glory, and the ideals of the Vikings - the strong men and the independent women - are still regarded with pride, and have been important cultural resources in the building of modern Scandinavia (see section "From Snorri to Superman", pages 28-62 above). Among the historical information in non-fictional works for children on the general themes of the Vikings, there is usually an overview providing information about Norse beliefs, which is inevitably coloured by the social assumptions of the author concerned.

In Norway a popular history of the Vikings in recent years for children of around ten years old is *Vikinger* [Vikings] by Ole Røsholdt. The brevity of the chapters in this volume, and the openly pedagogical aim, means that the author's value judgements are exposed as the material selected is presumably that considered of greatest importance and interest. This book for ten year olds contains a series of short chapters on Viking themes illustrated with texts from Old Norse sources and pictures of ancient artefacts



alongside modern illustrations. The Norse beliefs are described in a brief chapter entitled "Hva trodde vikingene på?" [What did the Vikings believe in?]. The chapter deals primarily with the gods Odin and Thor, and also with Loki. The female gods Frigg and Freyja (and also Freyr) are confined to a small box entitled: "Andre viktige personer i gudeverden" [Other important characters in the world of the gods]. The main mention made of female characters in Norse mythology is not as goddesses but as *volver* [seeresses] in a two paragraph section on "seid" [sorcery] opening with a story from Snorri's *Ynlingesaga*:

En finsk kongsdatter ville hevne seg på kong Valande i Sverige. Hun fikk en trollkvinne til å øve trolldom mot kongen. Kongen, som var på den andre siden av Bottenviken, ble plutselig svært søvnig. Men ikke før hadde han sovnet, så skrek han at et dyr trampet på ham så beina holdt på å brette. Til slutt ble han kvalt og døde. Her var det sjelen til trollkvinnen som fløy over kongen i skikkelse av et dyr, og drepte ham. Slik trolldom kaltes seid og ble helst drevet av kvinner.<sup>2</sup>

(Røsholdt, 1993: 14)

[A daughter of a Finnish king wanted revenge on King Valande in Sweden. She got a trollwoman to make trolldom against the king. The king, who was on the other side of Bottenviken, suddenly became very sleepy. But just as he was falling asleep, he screamed that an animal was stamping on him so that his legs were going to break. In the end he was suffocated and died. The trollwoman's soul had flown over the king in the form of an animal, and killed him. Sorcery of this kind was called "seid" and was most often practised by women.]

Odin's connection to black magic is put in a more positive light: he is said to be "En stor trollmann" [A great sorcerer] (Røsholdt, 1993: 11).

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<sup>2</sup> The subsequent chapter covering "Barn, unge og kvinner" does not quite manage to make amends for this somewhat negative portrayal of women: despite saying that "voksne kvinner ble sett på som likeverdige med mannen" (Røsholdt, 1993: 52) the story from the sagas that concludes this section is "Et uhyggelig eventyr om en hevngjerrig kvinne" and describes how Gudrun kills her two sons and serves them to her husband Atle.

Another Norwegian book *Fortellingen om Embla* [The story about Embla], edited by Ellen Høigård Hofseth, aimed at a similar age group also presents story alongside fact and leads the reader through a series of stories and water colour pictures depicting the lives of women and girls from the past. The text alternates between a fictional presentation and short sections of background information illustrated by line drawings. *Fortellingen om Embla* proves by its description of the Norns that strong positive female figures can be presented alongside the male Norse figures of Tor and Odin, who are also included. A far more positive depiction of women and of female roles is given, and the author informs the reader that we can conclude from saga sources that

kvinner på lik linje med menn kunne lede de hellige handlingene på vegne av et større område. (Høigård Hofseth, 1993: 120)  
[women on an equal basis to men could lead the holy acts on behalf of a larger area.]

The text continues to describe how the female goddesses of fate, the Norns, had a powerful task and

voktet skjebnebrønnen, og (...) spant enkeltmenneskers livstråd.  
(Høigård Hofseth, 1993: 121)  
[watched over the well of fate, and (...) wove the life threads of individuals.]

The authors of *Fortellingen om Embla* state their agenda from the outset, writing that it is their intention to look at history through female eyes, and Røsholdt's *Vikinger* does little to dispel their view that women are generally excluded from the history books.

Just as the authors of *Fortellingen om Embla* can be seen to recognise the importance for girls to see a female presence in history, an increasing recognition of the importance of Scandinavian mythological heritage is highlighted by the school anthology *Svart skinner solen* [Black Shines the Sun], produced as a Scandinavia-wide project by the Nordic Council of Ministers for use in schools by teenagers. Norse myth is mixed with those from the Finnish epic *Kalevala*, and from Sami, Greenlandic, and Faroese folk tradition. *Svart skinner solen* is a beautifully produced book with a rich variety of modern and ancient texts and illustrations.

The multiplicity of ways in which the ancient myths can be used in a modern classroom is demonstrated by *Svart skinner solen* with modern images of war placed alongside *Völuspá*, and a Greenlandic text "Månen og solen" [The moon and the sun] (Borberg et al, 1992: 27), telling of an incestuous explanation of why the moon chases the sun, could be used as the starting point for a discussion on the taboo subject of incest.

Another recent, and widely acclaimed work, from Norway also has educational aims within the framework of a story. Although Jostein Gaarder's *Sofies verden* (1991) [Sophie's World] is concerned with the history of philosophy as a whole, he includes Norse mythology rather than Classical, an approach which allows Scandinavian young people to see their culture not just as consumers but also as producers of philosophy/ideas, and it is perhaps this which presents the most empowering possibility for Norse myth, and can be seen to give children a distinct cultural identity in a multi-cultural world. Whether this has positive or negative consequences

depends upon whether Norse mythology (and implicitly Nordic culture) is presented as inherently superior to other mythologies.

## FICTION FOR CHILDREN

Retellings of mythology for children fall somewhere between non-fiction and fiction, and authors put their own mark on the material concerned using them as a vehicle for their own world-view. A Danish book for young children *Hugin og Munin fortæller om Nordens guder* [Hugin and Munin's Tales about the Nordic Gods] (1994) finds Odin's two ravens telling their three fledgling ravens about the world of the gods. Ostensibly a frame for the mythological stories, the author Erik Hjorth Nielsen links an environmental message to the world tree Yggdrasil and, bypassing criticism of the gods, he places the blame directly on the humans:

Yggdrasil angribes af meget ondt (...) Men den største fare for livets træ er de grådige og dumme mennesker, og det er en helt anden historie.

(Hjorth Nielsen, 1994)

[Yggdrasil is being attacked by much evil (...) But the greatest danger for the life of the tree is the greedy and stupid people, and that is an entirely different story.]

While this might indicate that his approach is going to portray the nuclear family from a liberal angle, there are clear gender stereotypes present and when the youngest raven asks if the reason they are left at home so often is due to the fact that both their father, Hugin, and mother, Munin, go out to work for Odin, it is the mother who reacts to the implicit criticism:

- Lad være med at skabe dig, sagde Munin. Godt nok er jeg en ravnemor, men I får da både mad og en ordentlig opdragelse.

(Hjorth Nielsen, 1994)

[Don't go on so, said Munin. I might be a raven mother, but you do get both food and a proper upbringing.]

Gender roles extend to the interests of the raven 'children', and the questioning of the warlike and underhand methods employed by the gods is also associated to gender. After hearing Valhalla's warriors described, the youngest raven's attitude is linked to her own gender:

Den yngste af ungerne var en hun, og snakken om krig og krigere interesserede hende ikke. Hun lukkede øjene og undertrykte en gabe. Men ved ordet 'hest' spærrede hun øjnene op.

(Hjorth Nielsen, 1994)

[The youngest of the children was female, and the talk about war and warriors didn't interest her. She closed her eyes and suppressed a yawn. But at the word 'horse' her eyes shot open.]

However, there are no more stories told that night, and the girl raven is also denied the story about Sleipner the next night as Munin has instead decided to relate the story of Suttung's mead, and the giantess, Gunnlod, who is so enamoured of Odin that she lets him drink her father's mead. A further example of female manipulation is portrayed in the re-telling of Freyja's acquisition of the necklace Brisingamen by "kvindelist" [feminine wiles], after the young girl raven has asked for stories about goddesses. The mother raven does point out that female Vikings did play an important role when their husbands were away but despite women's place in the workplace, gender specific roles and qualities remain, thus re-enforcing cultural attitudes.

## TOR ÅGE BRINGSVÆRD - MYTHMAKER

Tor Åge Bringsværd, whose views on Norse mythology were quoted in the introductory section (see pages 45 - 46), places particular emphasis on the importance of telling children Norse myths as a way of providing them with a secure cultural base, writing that "det er et spørsmål om å gi dem *røtter*" [it's a question of giving them roots] (Bringsværd, 1991: 71). In his series of picture books, *Vår gamle gudelaere* [Our ancient religious beliefs], the author's intention is stated from the outset, and opposite the title page of the first volume *En kjempe så stor som hele verden* [A giant as big as the whole world] Bringsværd writes:

I denne og andre bøker skal vi forsøke å vise hvordan de gamle nordmenn tolket livet og tilværelsen. (Bringsværd, 1985)  
[In this and other books we shall attempt to show how the ancient Norwegians interpreted life and existence.]

Bringsværd leads the reader from the creation of the world (*Vår gamle gudelære 1: En kjempe så stor som hele verden*) through to Ragnarok (*Vår gamle gudelære 12: Ragnarok*) and introduces characters and myths from the Old Norse sources. The use of different artists (see illustrations, pages 53 and 55 above) gives each volume a distinct character, and cohesion is created by the author's texts.

Bringsværd further expands on his approach to the mythological material in *Det eventyrlige* ("en bok om kunst, virkelighet og illusjon" [a book about art, reality and illusion]):

Vi er vant til å få mytene servert oss som fragmenter (...) Det jeg har prøvd - i all ubeskjedenhet - er å sette sammen alle disse bitene. Jeg leker at bakenfor alt virvar, har det en gang eksistert ett stort epos - en

lang fortelling. Og det er denne fortellingen, eller en som kunne vært fortalt, som jeg er interessert i å finne (...) Skape en kronologi, en rekkefølge. Hva hendte når og hvorfor og i relasjon til hva? Jeg kommer selvfølgelig ikke til å klare det. Jeg kommer til å plassere mange av bitene feil. Men likevel. Det er lov å prøve! Og det er et utrolig spennende litterært arkeologisk detektivarbeid uansett.

(Bringsværd, 1991: 76-77)

[We are used to getting the myths served to us as fragments (...) What I have attempted - in all immodesty - is to put all these pieces together. I make believe that behind all the confusion a huge epic has existed - one long tale. And it is this tale, or one which could have been told, which I am interested in finding (...) Create a chronology, an order. What happened when and why and in relation to what? I will, of course, not be able to manage it. I will put many of the pieces in the wrong places. But who cares. One is allowed to try. And it is an unbelievably exciting literary archaeological detective work anyway]

The creation of a unified whole creates to some extent a reassurance. This contrasts with the images of social collapse and fragmentation present within the *Eddas* and which authors whose works have been discussed in earlier chapters have drawn upon to symbolise contemporary social fragmentation.

### BRINGSVÆRD'S ODIN

While Bringsværd's *Vår gamle gudelære* is the most high profile of his works for children based on Norse mythology, he has also written plays for children drawing inspiration from the *Eddas*. A short play from 1978 - *Tor med hammer'n* [Thor with the hammer] - harnesses the appeal of myth to children, in a chaotic tale in which a young boy accompanies Tor to his 'marriage' to the giant Trym [Thrym]. A later full-length play, *Odin*, goes into greater psychological depth, and presents the central character, Odin, as a misunderstood leader struggling to save the world as external forces conspire against him. Written largely in verse, the play is made up of Eddic tales describing the process by which the Norse world has now come to be on the



verge of Ragnarok; Odin's meeting with Gunnlod, Balder's death and Ægir's banquet at which Loke and the gods trade insults. Odin himself is the main story-teller, and is supported in this role by his friend Mime, whose decapitated head sits on a column and offers various cryptic pieces of wisdom such as:

Hvem kan forstå opp og ned? Ut eller inn? Frem og tilbake? Hvem kan si hva som hendt? Hva som kunne ha skjedd? Og hva som vil skje? Likevel må vi fortelle det. Alt sammen. (p 12<sup>3</sup>)  
 [Who can understand up and down? Out and in? Forwards and Back? Who can say what happened? What could have happened? And what will happen? We must tell it all anyway. All of it.]

Bringsværd capitalises on the humorous potential within the myths and this breaks the possible darkness of much of the action surrounding the approach to Ragnarok and the death of Balder. For instance the opening sequence of the third act contains various exchanges between the cook, Andrimne [Andhrimnir], and the pig, Særimne [Sæhriminir] who is about to be served up to Odin's human army.

The play is in many ways similar in style to traditional British pantomime, with songs and a slap-dash sense of humour, as well as involvement of the audience. The vulgar giantess Angerboda [Angrboda] fulfils a role similar to that of the dame in British pantomime, and the repetition of humorous verses connected to particular characters such as Trym adds to this effect. With a phrasing lifted directly from *Tor med hammer'n*, the giant Trym demands reassurance that he is the most awful and ugliest of trolls: "Er jeg grim, er jeg grusom, er jeg grym?" [Am I ugly, am I gruesome, am I grumbly?] (p 147). Angerboda - Odin's fiercest opponent in the giant camp - demands on a number of occasions of her male followers, Trym and Hyme [Hymir],

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<sup>3</sup> Page numbers refer to Bringsværd, 1991a, published by Gyldendal Norsk Forlag.

that they: "rist brystene"[shake my breasts] (p 88), and on one occasion there appears to be a *menage à trois* between the three giants.

While the giants lend a crude humour to the play, Odin's narration and the structure of the play creates cohesion, and *Odin* has a defined structural circularity like a number of the works discussed in earlier chapters, such as *Kärleksguden Frö* (Chapter Three), *Gunnlaðar saga* (Chapter Four), *Misteltein* (Chapter Six), and *HUN* (Chapter Seven). The stage instructions for the four act play suggest that the play should be performed in the round, and this physical circularity is reflected by Odin's description of the cosmology as:

som årringer i et tre. Den ene sirkelen inne i den andre. (p 39)  
[like rings in a tree. One circle inside the other]

Time is deconstructed in a similar way to Torgny Lindgren's *Kärleksguden Frö* (see above, pages 122 -124), and the circularity of time imposes a structure whereby the "beginning" is not necessarily a defined starting point, and where the action extends beyond the "present". At the start of the play Odin discusses where he should begin his tale with Mime's head:

ODIN (*roper*)  
Men hvor skal vi begynne?  
(*Musikken vokser stadig*)

MIMES HODE (*roper*)  
Hvor som helst!

ODIN (*roper*)  
Da begynner jeg ved begynnelsen.

MIMES HODE (*virkelig gauler*)  
 Begynn før! Begynn lenge før!

(p 13)

[ODIN (shouts)  
 But where should we begin?  
 (The music grows steadily)

MIME'S HEAD (shouts)  
 Wherever you like!

ODIN (shouts)  
 Then I'll start at the beginning.

MIME'S HEAD (really yelling)  
 Begin before! Begin long before then!

In addition to commencing the tale before the beginning, fictional time continues beyond the 'present' - the point at which the three cockerels described in *Völuspá* crow - to the full destruction of Ragnarok:

den tid da æsene mister pusten og forstanden (...) den tid da alle makter går i oppløsning. (p 313)

[that time when the aser lose their breath and their sense (...) that time when all powers will collapse.]

However, whereas the effect of deconstruction of time in *Kärleksguden Frö* adds to the overall sense of fragmentation, and the circularity of time is seen to be a constant and hopeless cycle of destruction and renewal, in *Ragnarok* the use of this technique gives the possibility of a different ending - as Mime's head puts it:

Enhver fortelling kan slutte på minst tusen forskjellige måter. (p 333)  
 [Every tale can end in at least a thousand different ways.]

Odin acknowledges that his search for knowledge has led him to what he feared, when he should have looked for what he hoped for and announces:

Vi har fremdeles tid til å forandre ... og til å skrive *om*! Fortelle alt på nytt!  
(p 333)  
[We still have time to change things ... and to rewrite it all! Tell  
everything over again!]

This is echoed in Bringsværd's Odin in *Vår gamle gudelære 12: Ragnarok*, which gives a similar possibility for rewriting the ending:

"Men jeg vet også at ingenting av dette ennå har skjedd!" sier Odin  
trassig. "Ennå er Ragnarok bare en vond drøm! (...) En av mange  
muligheter. Så har vi fremdeles tid til å forandre ... finne nye og bedre  
veier." (Bringsværd, 1995)  
["But I know too that none of this has happened yet!" says Odin  
defiantly. "Ragnarok is still just a terrible dream! (...) One of many  
possibilities. So we still have time to change things ... find new and  
better ways."]

Bringsværd's unifying approach to the myths extends to the creation of cohesion between his versions of Norse mythology. The achronological aspect of intertextuality (Stephens, 1992), where texts are encountered in a random order means that for many Norwegian children Bringsværd's version will *be* Norse mythology and that it will therefore be his ideological approach that will form the basis of their understanding of the myths.

### TONE RINGEN - *EINGONG VAR INGENTING*

The demand for a happy ending for the world displayed in Bringsværd's work is also evident in Tone Ringen's *Eingong var ingenting* (1987) [Once there was nothing] a play for children and "den som veit at det er farleg å bli vaksen" [those who know it is dangerous to grow up]. Again the stories are presented in the form of a unified tale, with a frame created by an actress reading from a book. The influence of fairy tale is highly visible and shows itself not just in the title, but also in the inclusion of typical Norwegian fairy-tale phraseology such as "snipp, snapp, snute". The division between good and evil is more defined than in *Odin*, where the characters (with the possible exception of Loke) are neither portrayed as wholly good, nor wholly bad. Ringen's Loke is driven by jealousy to arrange the death of Balder, and by doing so he releases powers he is unable to control. In his attempt to upset the balance of power Loke becomes a victim of the wolf, and the warning to the young audience of the destructive nature of jealousy is clear. Frigg's role in her son Balder's death (see above, pages 182-183) is played down, and it is a gossiping squirrel and not Frigg who tells Loke that the mistletoe has not sworn not to harm Balder. Odin, though unfaithful, is seen to be seduced, and giants are bad, or lustful, like Odin's seductress - Gunnlod.

The reassuring presence of the narrator outside the chaotic world of the gods reminds the audience that the play is fantasy and reassures the audience that: "alt dette står det om her, sjølv om det ikkje er hendt enno" [everything is written in here, even though it has not happened yet] and emphasises the re-birth of the world after Ragnarok. In a similar message to Tor Åge Bringsværd's *Odin*, the actress suggests that the audience can contribute to a more positive ending:

Trur du at vi leikar betre enn gudar?  
Eg veit vi kan, om vi tenkjar og trur.

(Ringen, 1987: 60)

[Do you think we play better than gods?  
I know we can, if we think and believe.]

## TRANSFORMATIONS AND TRANSPORTATION:

### LARS-HENRIK OLSEN - *ERIK MENNESKESØN*

In *Odin* and *Eingong var ingenting* the emphasis is on mythological characters and human involvement is peripheral. In *Erik Menneskesøn* by Lars-Henrik Olsen, and *Drakeblod. Vegen til Åsgard* by Idar Lind, both fantastic novels for young teenagers, human characters are centre stage and in both cases contemporary teenagers are pivotal to the plot, and directly responsible for the averting of Ragnarok.

Many of the fantastical elements present in Norse mythology are equally at home in fiction for young people where transformations and transportations are more readily accepted than in adult fiction. The acceptance is not, however, taken for granted by Olsen, and the initial chapter of *Erik menneskesøn*, in which Tor comes to Earth in a thunder storm and transports Erik to Asgård, serves as an introduction to the story as a whole and contains a number of references that link the extraordinary science fiction elements to the ordinary life of the reader<sup>4</sup>. For example, Erik is 'home alone' and counting the distance between the lightening and thunder:

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<sup>4</sup> See C W Sullivan III's article: "Real-izing the Unreal: Folklore in Young Adult Science Fiction and Fantasy", in *Literature for Children*, edited by Peter Hunt. London: Routledge, 1992.

Endu et lyn for mod jorden. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, talte han, før han kunne høre buldret. Lynet mindede ham om de strålesværd, som Luke Skywalker og den onde Dark Wader havde i Stjernekrigsfilmene.

(p 7<sup>5</sup>)

[Yet another fork of lightning came towards the ground. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, he counted, before he could hear the thunder. The lightning reminded him of the laser-sword Luke Skywalker and the evil Darth Vader had in the *Star Wars* films.]

From the outset the story is placed within the context of the world of the superhero. However, it is young Erik, and not the gods who are to take on the superhero role and save the world. The gods are in a state of crisis and are growing old because of the theft of the goddess Idun and her youth-giving apples. Their power is additionally threatened by their enemies the giants who are beginning to encroach on Asgård. It is Erik's task to rescue Idun from the giant Udgårdloke [Utgard-Loki], and by doing so he saves the gods from certain downfall. In the company of Tor's daughter, Trud [Thrud], Erik sets off on an adventure that takes them to the realm of Hel, and through a number of close encounters with enemies and death. Despite their youth and lack of experience, the pair manage through teamwork, common sense, compassion and determination to overcome the trials that face them and they bring Idun and her apples triumphantly back to Asgård.

Frequent references in the first chapter to the past, remind the reader of the differences in perception in the past, and facilitate acceptance of the plot. For instance Erik, hearing the thunder storm, thinks:

Hvad mon de gjorde i gamle dage, når sådan noget skete? Han kunne godt forstå, hvorfor folk dengang var så bange for lyn og torden. Man kunne jo ikke gøre noget for at forsvare sig. (p 8)

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<sup>5</sup> Page numbers refer to Høst Paperback edition from 1994.



[What would they have done in the olden days, when something like that happened? He could understand why people were so scared of thunder and lightning then. You couldn't do anything to defend yourself against it.]

Erik's mention of his neighbours practising alternative medicine and the reference to their house as "heksehuset" [the witch's house] (Olsen, 1986: 9) links us to superstitions remaining from the past, and a reference in the second chapter to the sight of Tor's chariot being thought of as a comet, satellite or UFO by those on earth seeing it, refers the reader to modern technology and beliefs, employing the same technique of deflection of disbelief as Svava Jakobsdóttir in her novel *Gunnlaðar saga* (see Chapter Four, pages 134-141).

Tor and other characters in the novel recount mythological stories to Erik throughout the book, the educational content of which is made clear by the overview of the Asgård gods and the index at the back of the book. The stories are presented by way of background information to Erik for his mission or simply as entertaining anecdotes. On a number of occasions, Erik anticipates the readers' disbelief, for example when he is told of all Loke's weird and monstrous children:

Det er løgn, tenkte Erik. (p 35)  
 ['It's a lie,' thought Erik.]

His reaction when he imagines what his parents would think has a similar effect:

Hvis der kom én og sagde, jeg var i himlen sammen med alle guderne i Asgård, ville de ikke tro på ham, og han ville sikkert blive spærret inde, hvis han blev ved med at påstå det. (pp 109-110)  
 [If someone came along and said I was up in the sky with all the gods in Asgård they wouldn't believe him, and he'd probably get locked up if he held to his story.]

Erik's attitudes generally also facilitate acceptance of his role in the story, and he excitedly compares Tor's behaviour as he attacks the giants on their journey into Asgård to that of "en amerikansk cowboy" [an American cowboy] (p 21). However, Erik is dubious when he himself is presented with weapons by Ull, and the author distances Erik from Tor's violent action, thereby displaying late twentieth century sensitivity to violence. This, and a number of other cultural allusions place the teenager firmly in the 1980's, for instance Erik compares himself and Trud to the Danish National football team when they pass Odin's army of slain human warriors on their way out of Asgård:

Einherjerne buldrede nu med deres skjolde, som en værdig afskedsalut. Erik følte det samme, som fodboldlandsholdet sikkert følte, når de løb ind på en fodboldbane for øjnene af tusinder forventningsfulde tilskuere, der ville gøre alt for at bakke deres spillere op, et ubeskriveligt sug i mellemgulvet og en ringen for ørerne af den øredøvende larm. (p 147)  
[The warriors thundered with their swords now, in an honourable farewell salute. Erik felt like the national football team must feel when they ran onto a football pitch in front of thousands of expectant spectators who would do everything to support their players - an indescribable sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach and a ringing in his ears from the deafening commotion.]

The world of the gods is set in the legendary past, and with the analogies to modern society and the placing of Asgård in a parallel time to the human world, the past can be seen to be a means of commenting on the present. John Stephens describes this "medievalism" as involving

the invention of an alterity of time and place which, although more primitive, is also somehow nobler, and of a society whose beliefs,

structures, rules and obligations are clearer and more open than those of the society inhabited by the writers and their audiences. The function of this non-existent place is to comment on the decadence of the present and its values. (Stephens, 1992: 112)

The imaginary society portrayed in *Erik menneskesøn* contains such a 'primitive nobility', with both social nobility - the gods and many of the giants Erik meets are aristocratic - and 'moral nobility' - with clearly defined conventions governing social interaction, and is portrayed as worthier than those of twentieth century capitalist society:

- Det slog pludselig ned i [Erik] at hverken aser eller jætter snakkede om penge. Man gav til andre, når man havde noget, og fik, når man ingenting havde. Lige byttehandel skete også, men det var alt, og meget enkelt. (p 221)

[It suddenly struck him that neither the Aser or the giants spoke about money. They gave things to others when they had something, and got when they didn't have anything. They bartered as well, but that was all and very straightforward.]

The Asgård Erik enters is not an equal society, however, and while Tor has a huge mansion, and Udgårdsloke's fortress - which can be transported at his whim - is also impressive, the parents of Tor's servants, Tjalfe [Thialfi] and Roskva, live in a "lite, fattigt hus" [small impoverished house] (p 263).

The inequalities in Asgård extend to gender roles, and within Asgård it is the women who undertake domestic tasks: Tor's wife Sif [Siv], for example, spends the whole day cooking the evening meal, while he is out killing giants. At the start of their journey to Udgård, Erik and Trud stay with the watchman of the rainbow bridge,

Heimdal, and he expresses the opinion that the women of Asgård should have thought of providing the pair with adequate clothing:

Det ligner nu hverken Sif eller Frigg at glemme sådan noget. (p 153)  
[It's not like Sif or Frigg to forget something like that.]

Erik is the only human character in the novel, and he displays nobility of mind in the way he unquestioningly takes up and carries out the challenge of the task he is set. His honourable nature is highlighted by the contrast with Tor's runaway servant Tjalfe with whom he shares a devotion to Trud. The boys are said to look alike, and Erik is able to impersonate Tjalfe on his journey through Udgård. The physical similarity emphasises the differences in their character, with the underlying implication that people can themselves choose whether to act in an honourable or dishonourable manner. Tjalfe allows his jealousy of Erik, and of the gods generally, to fester, and he plots with other giants against Erik and Trud, almost succeeding in killing them by causing a landslide. Tjalfe's vendetta also threatens the survival of the gods by jeopardising Erik and Trud's mission, by attempting to reveal them as imposters to Udgårdsloke.

In contrast, Erik and Trud perform their mission honourably, and it is this that enables them to succeed where Tjalfe fails. The crucial point in their mission is their meeting with Loke, the only one who can tell them the present whereabouts of Udgårdsloke's mobile fortress in which Idun is imprisoned. Erik and Trud meet Loke - bound by the gods for his part in Balder's death - and his faithful wife Sigyn in a cave (see illustration, page 253)



Illustration XXIII

The wretched and emaciated Loke and Sigyn in this illustration in Lars-Henrik Olsen's *Erik menneskesøn* demonstrate the dramatically different range of possibilities for pictorial representation of Eddic material (compare nineteenth century Romantic portrayal of same subject, page 32). The drawing is by Erik Hjorth Nielsen whose book *Hugin og Munin fortæller* is discussed above.

Der stod en stor mand, radmager, udslidt og forpint, bundet med store klippeskiver om knæerne, om lænden og over skuldrene. Ved siden af stod en lige så undslidt og skelettynd kvinde, som holdt et kar løftet over mandens hoved. Oven over de to lå den største giftslange, Erik nogen sinde havde set.

(p 253)

[A man was standing there, unbelievably thin, worn out and long-suffering with huge slices of rocks around his knees, around his loin, and on his shoulders. Beside him stood an equally exhausted and skeletal woman holding a bowl above her husband's head. Up above the two of them lay the biggest venomous snake Erik had ever seen.]

At this vital moment, Erik and Trud choose not to use threats to elicit the necessary information. Erik feels genuinely sorry for Loke and gives him water. Despite this kindness, Loke scoffs at Trud's request for his help in saving Asgård. Erik wisely keeps his mouth shut as Trud persuades Loke to give her the information:

Hun var klar over, hun skulle bruge hele sin psykologiske overtalelseevne for at få det ud af Loke, hun ville. (p 254)

[She realized she had to use all her psychological powers of persuasion to get Loke to tell her what she wanted.]

Using her somewhat anachronistic insight, Trud points out that not only the gods, but also Loke's own children and giants are destined to die at Ragnarok.

When Loke finally tells them the whereabouts of Udgårdsloke they further show their nobility of mind through their additional compassion. Erik holds a dish above Loke's head while Sigyn empties the full one and is given the opportunity to wash and eat. This unsolicited gesture prompts Loke to give Erik his magic shoes that can make the wearer run faster than anyone else, which he wears when he beats Tjalfe in a crucial race arranged by Udgårdsloke. Although not all giants are portrayed as bad (Erik and



Trud receive considerable help from giants - particularly the female giants with whom the male gods have had relationships) it is Tjalfe's "giantness" which can be seen to be one of the elements contributing to his lack of nobility, and this is characteristic of Grundtvigian dualistic interpretations of the Norse myths (see above, pages 34 - 37 on Grundtvig's mythology).

Trud and Erik succeed in their mission, and avert Ragnarok, but only for the time being. In Olsen's novel Ragnarok is portrayed as inevitable, but the moment for a change in the world order is not ripe. The ending of the novel ensures that the established patriarchal hierarchy remains in place, thus affirming its legitimacy, and by implication the social structures the world of Asgård reflects. The happy ending concludes with Tor telling Erik that he countenances the prospect of a relationship between Erik and his daughter, and Trud's gratitude that Erik is acceptable to her father compounds the reactionary foundations to the novel.

### **IDAR LIND - *DRAKEBLØD. VEGEN TIL ÅSGARD***

A similar subtext is present in Idar Lind's *Drakeblod* series, which like the story about Erik contains a transportation to the legendary past where a quest is linked to the development of a character. *Vegen til Åsgard* (1990) is the second novel for young people in Lind's trilogy, and continues the story of the blind boy Geirr, transported from a contemporary setting into a Medieval setting on "den andre sida" [the other side]. The human world has lost contact with gods and other supernatural beings and is portrayed as being full of conflict, mistrust and social injustice. The country is enslaved and controlled by the cruel Torstein Jarl and his men. Once transported, Geirr is able to see and is set the task of fulfilling a prophecy about "det kvite spydet"



[the white spear] which will lead to *Drakeblod* [Dragon blood] - a precious stone that will re-open the road between the gods of Åsgard and the human world. In the first volume of the trilogy, *Det kvite spydet* [The white spear] (1988), Geirr meets Symre, a 'seidmøy' [sorceress], who uses her gifts to cure and help people, and Ragni whom he saves from a sacrificial death. Despite their attempts in the first volume, it is not until *Vegen til Åsgard* that the three find *Drakeblod*, and the road to Åsgard and the gods.

*Det kvite spydet* is told from Geirr's point of view and the perspective shifts in *Vegen til Åsgard* to focus on Ragni. Having been raped by the Jarl's men towards the end of the previous volume, *Vegen til Åsgard* sees the young woman give birth to a child - Guttorm. The quest to find *Drakeblodet* is paralleled by a process of personal development through which the outlawed Ragni comes to terms with her child<sup>6</sup>. The process of development is mirrored by a physical movement as the companions flee the Jarl's men and continue the search for the stone. The movement takes them from the level of the sea where the novel opens; beneath the earth to the dwarf-realm; through the plains where they are captured by the flying people; and finally up into the mountains and beyond to Åsgard. Ragni's personal goddess is the giantess Skadi and, like Skadi, she feels most at home in the mountains.

As in *Erik menneskesøn* one of the main implications of the subtext is the importance and benefits of using one's skills to the best of one's ability. The three principal

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<sup>6</sup> Here we see modern ideas about motherhood imposed into a historical setting, as a child born in these circumstances in the era in which the book is set would have probably been left outside to die.

characters have very different skills, and it is only by combining their efforts that they manage to overcome the problems they face, and with Symre's psychic skills and wisdom, Geirr's intuition, and Ragni's common sense they win through.

The novel contains a number of mythological and supernatural elements, and although the gods are religious deities they are also fallible physical beings, and Frøy [Freyr], for example, is a dirty old man who tries to rape Ragni. The gods seem considerably less concerned about the loss of contact with the human world. However, the re-establishment of contact between the two worlds on the reopening of the road to Åsgard also has a positive impact on the world of the gods, as the long winter ends and leaves start reappearing on the world tree Yggdrasil.

The other main characters drawn from folklore are the dwarfs, and like the gods they are portrayed as fallible. The dwarfs are nearing extinction and searching for *Drakeblod* as well, because only reconciliation between the dwarfs and the gods will prevent them dying out. The cause of the crisis can be seen to be greed: the dwarfs' isolation was prompted by their theft of Odin's arm ring, Draupne. The corrupting influence of greed is particularly linked to the dwarfs, one of whom perishes when he falls to his death trying to acquire a treasure for his own gain. The main dwarf character, Fanja Kana, is also greedy and starts to steal after he sees Draupne, consequently almost failing to complete his task of returning Draupne to the gods. A number of the mythological elements are presented in a matter of fact way, such as the unquestioned existence of dwarfs and the magical rainbow road to Åsgard, Bifrost. Other objects and events are given a non-mythological explanation, for example an amazingly swift boat and 'flying' men are explained by their connection to

a mysterious eastern culture with greater technology. By in part explaining the mysterious, Lind places some of the mythical elements in the logical/rational sphere. This facilitates acceptance of other unexplained elements, as can be seen to have been the case with *Erik menneskesøn* and *Gunnlaðar saga*.

Throughout the novel Ragni kills men who try to attack her and these killings are portrayed as a psychotic reaction to her earlier trauma, which she later does not remember. In contrast, Geirr kills in protection of himself and his companions on several occasions in *Det kvite spydet*, and these killings are not depicted in the same manner and are connected to his role in the search for *Drakeblod*. Implicit in this portrayal is that male and female violence are qualitatively different.

The outcome of Ragni and Geirr's 'personal' missions can also be seen to differ, and while Geirr continues on his way at the end of the novel, Ragni achieves a state of contentment after risking her life to save her unwanted child. Her happiness is apparently contingent on her acceptance of the child, and she stays behind in Åsgard when her companions leave, in a safe female environment with Skadi, physically removed from the human world.

#### **TORILL THORSTAD HAUGER - *RAVNEJENTA***

Like *Vegen til Åsgard* and *Erik menneskesøn*, Torill Thorstad Hauger's novel *Ravnejenta* [The raven girl] (1989) is set in the legendary (Viking) past, although without the element of fantastic transportations that characterises the two earlier books.

The central character of Thorstad Hauger's book - the so-called 'Ravnejenta' - has not only to come to terms with her past, like Ragni, but also to discover it, and much of the story is taken up with her search for an identity, as at the outset she is unaware of whom her parents are. The illegitimate and motherless child of the great Jarl Håkon [Earl Håkon], Ravnejenta has to come to terms with her 'otherness' - she is an outsider both socially and physically. With a dark southern appearance inherited from her mother, she lives alone in a hut on the mountain cast out from the Jarl's court by his vindictive and jealous wife - Jarlefrua [the earl's wife].

Bullied because of her unusual looks she is taunted with a number of abusive names, in addition to "Ravnejenta", the name by which she is addressed throughout, she is described as "trolljenta" [the troll girl] (p 45<sup>7</sup>), "en ond ravn" [an evil raven] (p 53) and "villjenta" [the wild girl] (p 60).

Despite her many disadvantages, Ravnejenta's resourcefulness and resilience enable her to win through, her past kindnesses are repaid enabling her to successfully flee the cruel Jarlefrua. A young girl living alone and hunting to feed herself, Ravnejenta's self-sufficiency is in the tradition of Astrid Lindgren's Pippi in the *Pippi Långstrump* [Pippi Longstocking] books, and she becomes a skilled and respected healer under the tutelage of her mentor, the slave woman Kumba.

The Norse gods in *Ravnejenta* are similar to those in *Ravn og due* by Vera Henriksen (Chapter Five) in so far as they are portrayed as spiritual entities, rather than physical

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<sup>7</sup> Page numbers refer to the hardback edition published by Gyldendal Norsk Forlag in 1989.

beings, and Ravnejenta has a personal goddess, Eir<sup>8</sup>. The principal intertextual use of Norse myth comes from the brief italicised passages at the start of each of the three sections, where the visit of a *volve* to the Jarl's court is described. The *volve* is feared but her pronouncements are respected and eagerly awaited. In the first such passage, she predicts "en underlig skjebne" [a remarkable fate] (p 6) for Ravnejenta, and advises Kumba to ensure that Ravnejenta leaves the Jarl's court before she is seven. This sets the scene for events to follow and partially explains why a seven year old girl is living alone in the mountains.

The subsequent two sections are preceded by passages clearly influenced by *Völuspá* (see above, pages 14-18 and 206-210) and, as with *Hugin og Munin fortæller*, the criticism inherent in the predictions is aimed directly at humans:

*Men ingen lytter, hvisket volva. - Ingen lærer av alle de ugjerninger som menneskene har utført til alle tider. Alt gjentar seg på nytt. Derfor er asken Yggdrasil truet. Fra rot til topp er den utsatt for ødeleggende krefter. Det er alt for mye svik og urett i verden. Treet vil råtne opp innvendig. (p 98)*

*[But no-one listens, whispered the 'volve'. - No-one learns from all the bad deeds people have carried out throughout time. Everything repeats itself over again. Therefore, the ash Yggdrasil is threatened. From root to crown, it is submitted to destructive powers. There is too much betrayal and injustice in the world. The tree will rot from the inside out.]*

However, despite the predictions of doom the underlying message is positive as with *Erik menneskesøn* and *Vegen til Åsgard*. The final section of *Ravnejenta* provides

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<sup>8</sup> Eir is an obscure goddess described by Snorri to be "an extremely good physician" (Snorri, 1987: 29).

hope through the images from *Völuspá* describing the time of renewal following Ragnarok:

*Men så skal det stige en ny jord opp av havet: grønn og rik, der det ikke finnes ødeleggende krefter. Noen fra den gamle jorda skal overleve, og i den nye heimen skal de få det godt. Der skal ikke være frykt og ingen kulde. Ild og jordskjelv, storm og torden må til for at det gode liv skal kunne begynne. (p 170)*

*[But then a new earth will rise up out of the ocean: green and rich, where there will be no destructive forces. Some people from the old world will survive, and they will have a good life in the new world. There will be no fear and no coldness. Fire and earthquakes, storms and thunder have to occur in order that the good life will be able to start.]*

Apart from the introductory passages, the references to Old Norse myth are an element of the story mentioned in passing in connection to the beliefs of the main characters, and as an aspect of their everyday lives, for example in the names of the days of the week - "Det var Odins dag" [It was Odin's day] (p 106) - and in their oaths and toasts:

*Skål for den enøyde Odin og for Tor som slår gnister på himmelen. Skål for Frøy som får alt til å vokse. (p 48)*

*[A toast to the one-eyed Odin and to Tor who strikes sparks in the sky. A toast to Frøy who makes all things grow]*

Within the Viking setting, the importance of contemporary values are conveyed, and as well as being a model of self-sufficiency, Ravnejenta is portrayed as having to choose by which standards she wishes to live. As a powerful medicine woman, Ravnejenta is called upon to come to the aid of her enemy the Jarl's wife who is dying. Ravnejenta is faced with the choice of whether to give the woman a medicine that will

cure her, or poison that will kill her. The choice is not clear-cut and Ravnejenta initially mixes the poison. She relents but despite giving her the good medicine the Jarl's wife dies.

Ravnejenta is conciliatory and initiates a truce after the Jarl's death, between the enemy camps of Jarl Håkon and Ottar Illuge, ending a feud in which the original causes have become irrelevant. However, the role of peacemaker is not confined solely to female characters and her half-brother, the new Jarl Sigurd Håkonson and Ottar's son, her friend Tord Illugeson (whose life she has earlier saved) are equally responsible for ending the conflict.

As a reward for her goodness, the 'lawspeaker' pronounces Ravnejenta's legitimate right to bear the name 'Ragnhild Jarlsdotter'. She also wins the heart of Tord, but this romance is played down, and greater emphasis is placed on her important future role predicted by the *volve*.

*Ravnejenta* depicts women as powerful and passionate, and although Jarlefrua's character is essentially that of a wicked step-mother, the psychological motivation for her cruelty (an absent unfaithful husband and unfulfilling life) is also portrayed. Just as Jarlefrua is not entirely evil, Ravnejenta is not simply a good character either, and the clear message (as in *Erik menneskesøn*) is that it is an individual choice as to whether one acts selfishly, or for the greater good.

Despite the strong portrayal of the central female character, *Ravnejenta* is also essentially socially affirming, and although the possibility of a brighter future is



presented through renewal made possible by the passing of the older generation, the younger generation whose responsibility it is to shape the future are the hereditary heirs of the old order.

The reaffirmation of social values which takes place at a subtextual level in novels such as those described above like *Ravnejenta*, and within literature generally, has a potentially powerful impact, particularly in works for children and young people, and Peter Hollindale in an article, "Ideology and the Children's Book", questions whether

the happy ending of a novel amount[s] to a 'contract of reaffirmation' of questionable values which have earlier seemed to be on trial.  
(Hollindale, 1992: 38)

In the works described in this chapter, we can see how the portrayal of the averting of Ragnarok legitimises the social structures which have contributed to the crisis/Ragnarok. By writing happy endings in books for children/young people and thereby reaffirming the underlying subtext within the portrayal of the fictional societies, and within the *Eddas*, the intertextual presentations of Norse mythology become qualitatively different to the revisionist approach of the works described in earlier chapters.

Myth is not a 'neutral' material that merely adds texture to a story, it is socially and ideologically determined, and in the subtext of children's literature its powerful social function is most clearly evident.

## SECTION THREE

### CONCLUSION: HARNESSING RAGNAROK

*She sees the earth    rising again  
out of the waters,    green once more;  
an eagle flies over rushing waterfalls,  
hunting for fish    from the craggy heights.*

*Völuspá: 45*

## CONCLUSION: HARNESSING RAGNAROK

In the previous sections the use of Norse myth in literature has been examined, looking firstly at the process of intertextuality, and the cultural and ideological aspects involved in intertextual use of myth. This was followed by an overview of the ways in which Norse myth has been used in Scandinavia up to the present day. In Section II, a number of contemporary Scandinavian literary works were studied in detail both from a literary perspective, and as examples of the ways in which authors employ mythology both as a plot device and also as a means of drawing upon the cultural significance of myth.

Mythology is part of the foundation of a nation, simultaneously shaping, and being defined by cultural identity and the underlying ideology on which this is based. Individual identity is also shaped by mythology, and Bruno Bettelheim, in his book *The Uses of Enchantment*, describes how:

Myths and closely related religious legends offered material from which children formed their concepts of the world's origin and purpose, and of the social ideals a child could pattern himself after. (Bettelheim, 1976: 24)

When we, as children or adults, encounter myth in literature this socialisation process contributes to maintaining a sense of cultural and individual identity through the ideological content of myth.

In Scandinavian countries this characteristic of myth is demonstrated by the way in which Norse myth was employed by nineteenth century authors in the process of nation-building (see introductory section, pages 28-41), and how for many Danes, for

example, N F S Grundtvig's national *interpretation* of Norse mythology *became* Norse mythology itself.

As a fundamental element defining a nation's culture, myth, as has been demonstrated above, is not neutral, and there can be no objective retelling of myth. This was shown particularly in the previous chapter (Chapter Eight) which concentrated on the presentation of mythology for children and young people, and exemplified how works for this age-group have an explicit or implicit ideological subtext underlying the intertextual use of myth, which is also present - though sometimes more subtly - in works for adults.

A number of the texts discussed in earlier chapters - for instance, Villy Sørensen's *Ragnarok* (Chapter Two), Svava Jakobsdóttir's *Gunnlaðar saga* (Chapter Four) and Tor Obrestad's *Misteltein* (Chapter Six) - can be seen to have been written from overt political and moral positions. The function of intertextuality in these works is therefore more visible, and the revision of the myths concerned contains discernible social criticism.

Wherever myth is a textual element, the ideology of the myths (whether approved or rejected by the author) becomes an intrinsic part of the text, and, therefore intertextuality raises issues wider than a study of the author's sources (Stephens, 1992), and how

intertextual function is not restricted to the relationships between *texts* defined in a narrow sense, but also operates in the larger sense of a cultural discourse, especially with reference to the relationships between language, signs and culture. The product can be a complex within which texts, and texts and society, interact.

(Stephens, 1992: 116)

The interactive process of intertextuality can be seen to create a chain reaction whereby the interplay of texts, and our cultural attitudes towards the texts concerned, combine with any number of associations to expand the process beyond a straightforward borrowing from an earlier text. With regard to the texts that provide our principal knowledge of Norse mythology, our knowledge is composed of limited and sometimes contradictory material which does not represent a Norse proto-myth. John Lindow argues that we should view the extant Eddic material as examples of thirteenth century literature, writing that

they are a literary phenomenon, despite their former association with religion, and as such they deserve consideration as part of the corpus of Norse literature. (Lindow, 1985: 54)

The *Eddas* are not Norse myth and, indeed, the *Prose Edda* can be seen to be an early example of intertextual use of Norse myth, with Snorri quoting heavily from earlier texts (see above, pages 18-25). Subsequent use of Norse myth generally refers back to the thirteenth century texts; however, it also demonstrates the achronological nature of intertextuality. The process involves not just a simple single meeting between text and intertext but a chain reaction of responses, with readers (and authors as readers) encountering texts in a random order. For instance, Adam Oehlenschläger drew primary inspiration in his use of Norse mythology from Johannes Ewald, and in turn provided inspiration for the work of N F S Grundtvig (see above, pages 34-37), with Grundtvig, as has been mentioned, subsequently providing the principal interpretation of Norse myth in Denmark, and the whole of Scandinavia to the present day. Once authors have encountered later use of Norse myth they may then return to earlier versions, with a variety of intertexts thus providing inspiration for their own work.

The complex process involved in intertextuality is demonstrated by the manner in which Villy Sørensen was prompted by his research on Wagner to re-examine Snorri's *Edda* (see footnote, page 70). His work can therefore be seen to be an intertextual response to Grundtvig, Wagner and Snorri. The resultant linear and apocalyptic interpretation of the myths and rehabilitation of the much maligned Loki/Loke in *Ragnarok*, was criticised principally for the challenge it represented to Grundtvig's interpretation of Norse mythology, rather than its challenge to the *Eddas*.

In his afterword to the English translation of *Ragnarok, The Downfall of the Gods*, Sørensen describes how the furore the book created made him realise that "the old myths were surprisingly topical" (Sørensen, 1989:122) and we can see how they can be (and have been) re-told and re-used to fit current social preoccupations. Thus in the Second World War, both the Nazis and the Scandinavian resistance movements viewed the battle between gods and giants in symbolic terms as representing the ideological clash of that particular generation (see pages 42-49). In the light of contemporary social preoccupations and beliefs, where dualistic interpretations of the myths as right versus wrong no longer stand up (Carlsen, 1994; Henriksen, 1984), the literary interpretations of the myths become less concerned with absolutes, and more concerned with psychological motivation, for example in Sørensen's *Ragnarok*, and Henriksen's *Ravn og due*.

Once the demand for an absolute villain, or absolute truth, has been dropped, the possibility arises for a re-examination of the mythological characters, and the "accepted version" of their role. Villy Sørensen's rehabilitation of Loki/Loke has been mentioned above, and Erling Kittelsen's depiction of a twentieth century sibyl in his

poetry cycle *HUN*, as a silenced and objectified passive onlooker, can also be seen to fit into this mould. Similarly Svava Jakobsdóttir's revision of the story about Gunnlod, in her novel *Gunnlaðar saga*, gives her critique of contemporary society an extra edge, as the injustice meted out to Gunnlod by Odin can be seen to be part of a historical suppression of Gunnlod's story (and of women).

Revision of myth does not imply a particular ideological stance, or a positive morality and Mircea Eliade writes that

myth, in itself, is not a guarantee of "goodness" or "morality"  
(Eliade, 1963: 140)

Intertextual use of myth can sometimes assume the position of a higher moral ground. While the opposite is not necessarily the case either, the nature of myth is such that it can be manipulated to demonstrate most points of view, simultaneously being used to support and to criticise the establishment. Roland Barthes, describing how myths support the status quo, writes that

myths (...) immobilize the world: they must suggest and mimic a universal order which has fixated once and for all the hierarchy of possessions. Thus, every day and every-where, man is stopped by myths, referred by them to this motionless prototype which lives in his place, stifles him in the manner of a huge internal parasite and assigns to his activity the narrow limits within which he is allowed to suffer without upsetting the world.

(Barthes, 1993: 155)

While Barthes' view is expressed with particularly strong sentiments, arguing for a fixed interpretation of myths which is not open to challenge, is related to their function of social affirmation.



In contrast, revision of myths can be used to force us away from a fixed interpretation, and provide a powerful means of cultural critique, and the study of myths can introduce

us to new ways of looking at social structures, so that we can examine constants and variables in the organization of human society, in particular (...) women's roles across different cultures and historical periods. For westerners, our interpretation of our mythological heritage conditions the way in which we think about ourselves. (Larrington, 1992: ix)

All reuse/rewritings of myths represent a revision on some level, and revision of myth does not necessarily imply a rejection of our cultural foundation. On the simplest level, even an omission of a small detail represents a revision, such as Jan-Erik Ebbestad's version of Thor's visit to the giant Geirrod, which changes the myth's "register", making it more appropriate for re-telling to children (pages 230-231). At the other extreme, where revision extends beyond a balanced re-examination of specific and limited aspects or characters, it can become chaotic and caricatured, as in Torgny Lindgren's *Kärleksguden Frö*.

The majority of the overtly revisionist works described above *target* the revision to a particular element, for example to a specific character, such as Svava Jakobsdóttir with Gunnlod in *Gunnlaðar saga*, or Villy Sørensen with Loki in *Ragnarok*.

Alternatively the myths can mirror and reinforce themes played out within the work as a whole, for instance the myth of the death of the god Balder in Tor Obrestad's *Misteltein*, and use of *Völuspá*/Ragnarok in Vera Henriksen's *Ravn og due*.

Revision combined with the intention to re-evaluate a particular myth, and the social assumptions it represents, however, allows a re-evaluation of our understanding of

our culture, and the individual's place within it (Ostriker, 1986). Where social criticism is an element in the works for adults analysed above, the main thrust is aimed at the centres of power in society. The authors harness the images of Ragnarok, moulding them to represent general themes of contemporary social and personal fragmentation, echoing the images of collapse represented so powerfully in *Völuspá*.

The themes of social collapse drawn from the prophecies in *Völuspá* can be seen to embody fears voiced in the media generally about lack of social cohesion and falling standards of morality. Current environmental issues and concerns are linked to Ragnarok, and particularly to the destruction of the world tree Yggdrasil, especially in works for young people, for instance *Hugin og Munin fortæller*, *Vegen til Åsgard*, and *Ravnejenta*. Environmental issues are also raised in Jakobsdóttir's *Gunnlaðarsaga*, in which the disaster at Chernobyl is linked to Odin's theft of Gunnlod's cauldron, and in the images of the polluted sea in Kittelsen's *HUN*. Through criticism of the decaying world of the gods, comes criticism of human society, for example in Sørensen's *Ragnarok* and Lindgren's *Kärleksguden Frö* where the gods have palpably socio-allegorical roles.

Use of Norse mythology in works by Scandinavian authors can be seen to place specific emphasis on the social critique as the myths point back to the authors' countries of origin and the cultural foundations of the Scandinavian nations themselves.

In the books for adults discussed above Ragnarok is portrayed as a current event (and, with the exception of Sørensen's *Ragnarok*, as recurring). However, we can see how the demand for a happy ending in works for children and young people leads to

the aversion of Ragnarok, and the cataclysmic events are portrayed as a future possibility rather than the "truende virkelighed" [threatening reality] it is described as by Villy Sørensen (Sørensen, 1983: 230). The implication in works for younger readers is that they have the responsibility for creating a positive ending, and this is emphasised by the central role young heroes play in the process of averting Ragnarok. However, avoiding the "inevitable" physical and social collapse that follows social conflict of the type portrayed in *Völuspá* affirms the legitimacy of the social structure portrayed, which has itself precipitated the crisis/fragmentation. There is, therefore, often a conflicting social/ideological message in works for young people (Sullivan, 1992).

The themes of environmental and social collapse reflect current social concerns which, in due course, may be linked to a *fin de siècle* angst. The works examined can therefore be seen to be generational. In their intertextual use of myth, however, the authors concerned are participating in a tradition that stretches back at least as far as Snorri Sturlusson and Saxo Grammaticus.

My opening quote by Northrop Frye that myth in a literary context "means everything it has been made to mean in later literature" (Frye, 1982: 35) communicates the process by which myth develops and grows within literature, its meaning developing and changing like language, and like language able to carry several meanings simultaneously. Sometimes we may dislike associations attached to myth, however, it is impossible to fix, turn back, or permanently harness the meaning of myth.

Myths will continue to develop new associations as intertextual use of mythology develops, extends and re-examines them. While they *are* used in literature for their

"re-tell" value, an element of their quality as "good stories" is the social and cultural mystique they have retained despite their general loss of religious significance, and

the mythology of a people is far more than a collection of pretty or terrifying fables to be retold in carefully bowdlerized form to our schoolchildren. It is the comment of the men of one particular age or civilization on the mysteries of human existence and the human mind, their model for social behaviour, and their attempt to define in stories of gods and demons their perception of the inner realities (...) We cannot return to the mythological thinking of an earlier age (...) We cannot deny the demands of our own age, but this need not prevent us turning to the faith of another age with sympathetic understanding, and recapturing imaginatively some of its vanished power. It will even help us to view more clearly the assumptions and beliefs of our own time. (Ellis Davidson, 1964: 9)

H R Ellis Davidson's suggestion that by examining mythology we are better able to understand ourselves and our cultures, is also expressed by Villy Sørensen who, writing of how the old myths still arouse heated debate, states that

myths are true at any time, but in every age their truth has to be reinterpreted and reassimilated. (Sørensen, 1989: 123)

Intertextual re-use and revision of Norse mythology in contemporary Scandinavian literature is part of this constant process of re-interpretation and reassimilation, and the authors discussed in this thesis are clearly generational in their approach to the myths and the themes within them that they choose to highlight. They are also, however, part of a tradition whereby the cultural and imaginative resource of myth is continually drawn upon with authors using the stories of the past to comment on the present.

## APPENDIX

Fiona Twycross

Politicized Use of Norse Myth  
and Tor Obrestad's *Misteltein* (1987)

The politicization of Norse mythology goes back at least as far as the time the stories were first written down. When the Danish priest and historian Saxo Grammaticus stated in his *Gesta Danorum* (History of the Danes) that the Norse gods were actually deified Danish heroes, he was ostensibly following the Twelfth Century church's anti-pagan teachings, but he was also simultaneously claiming for Denmark the reflected glory of heroes so mighty that people believed them to be gods. In Sweden the royal dynasty of the Ynglings traced their ancestry back to the god Frey (Yngvi-Frey) demonstrating their divine right to the throne. This tradition of gaining reflected glory through association with ancient mythology and mythological figures continued through the work of a variety of scholars, among them Olaus Rudbeck who, in the late Seventeenth Century, used Old Norse texts to support his claim in his *Atlantica* that Sweden was the lost land of Atlantis and therefore the centre of the foundation of Western culture and civilization (see Mats Malm, in Wawn 1994, 1-26), and, in the politically rearranged Scandinavia after the Napoleonic Wars, writers in Scandinavia looked to the glorious Viking past to create or reaffirm a sense of national identity. In Norway, the ancient Norse texts were employed in the building of the newly recreated nation and Snorri's *Heimskringla* was hailed as exclusively Norwegian.

In our own century, the apparently constructive literary use of the Norse myths in the first half of the Nineteenth Century developed into an exploitation of the gods and heroes in a more sinister form. Through National Socialist propaganda, notably the work of Alfred Rosenberg, the Norse/Germanic myths and legends were combined with

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other Indo-European traditions to form an Aryan system. In *The Feminist Companion to Mythology* (1992), Carolyne Larrington describes the style of rhetoric Rosenberg inspired:

A popular propaganda image was that of Hitler as the Hero awakening Germany, the sleeping Valkyrie, an image deriving its potency from the ancient motif of the land as bride to the king, the approaching conqueror as the husband who will sexually awaken her and make her fertile. [Larrington 1992, 159]

Mythical allusions were widely used in Nazi Germany and by the indigenous National Socialist movements in the Scandinavian countries. An article in the Norwegian Nazi party's monthly periodical, *NS Månedshäfte*, in February 1943 takes the verses describing the lead-up to Ragnarok – the downfall of the gods – in the Eddic poem *Voluspá* (The Sibyl's Prophecy) as a prediction of the turmoil and destruction of the Second World War to be followed by a National Socialist golden age. The author, Kai Normann, takes symbols directly from one of *Voluspá*'s most ominous verses:

Brothers will die,	slain by their brothers,
Kinsmen betray	their close kin;
woe to the world then,	wedded to whoredom;
battle-axe and sword rule,	split shields asunder,
storm-cleft age of wolves	until the world goes down
only hatred	in the hearts of men.

[Terry 1990, 5]

writing:

Vi lever enda ikke i fredens og gudsrikets forjettede  
tidsalder, vår tid er sverdets tid, jernetid, ulvetid. [*NS*  
*Månedshäfte* 1943:2, 57]

[We are still not living in the promised age of peace  
and the kingdom of God, our time is the time of the



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sword, time of iron, time of wolves.]

Although the main connection made between the Norse myths and the Second World War is their use by the Nazis, they were also used by elements within the Scandinavian resistance. In *Skaldemjöd i berget* (The Mead of Inspiration in the Mountain, 1996), Lars Lönnroth sites the example of the Danish resistance movement during the occupation of 1940-1945 and among other examples mentions Aage Møller, a Grundtvigian priest from South Jutland, who heralded those fighting the Nazis as belonging to "asarnas ätt" (the race of gods) (Lönnroth 1996, 164).

Echoes of the Nazi use of Norse myth can be found today on the margins of shady political groups (see Lönnroth 1996, 208-218), and in the words and actions of politically extreme characters such as "Greven" (The Count) in Norway, whose defence for murder and the burning of churches during his trial in 1994 came from his religious and political viewpoint as a heathen. In contrast to these figures stand a number of contemporary Scandinavian authors who can be seen to be expressing a more left-wing anti-establishment viewpoint through the vehicle of the Norse mythology. Among these is Danish author Villy Sørensen whose *Ragnarok* provoked interest and controversy when it was first published in 1982. Sørensen's allegorical adaptation of the Eddic stories can be seen to have broken new ground and parallels the dangers of the duality of the Norse cosmos – with gods and giants are in opposition – with a cold war situation that concludes in a nuclear holocaust-style environmental collapse.

*Re: Interpreting Sources*

The existence of conflicting use of Norse myth in the same era and society demonstrates the essential openness of the mythological material, and the range of possibilities the myths present for re-interpretation by different generations and ideologies. One of the aspects that increases the flexibility of the Norse mythology in particular is the

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uncertainty regarding interpretation of the content and the reliability of the two main literary sources: the *Poetic Edda* and Snorri's *Prose Edda*. Our view of Norse mythology is constructed from interpretations based on the interpretations of earlier commentators in a tradition that reaches back to the earliest recorders of the myths, and although one should not unduly exaggerate the influence of Christianity on the myths, it should not be forgotten that the Eddas were recorded about two hundred years after the Icelandic conversion.

In later re-constructing of tales from the extant material, Snorri's *Prose Edda* has often been given preference over the *Poetic Edda* for the simple, and understandable, reason that it is easier to digest. But while Snorri's ready-made stories allow us to avoid having to grapple with obscure references in the Eddic poems, we have no reason to regard them as "pure". Although Snorri's Edda is largely read for its mythological content, his principal stated objective was to preserve a knowledge of scaldic poetry through the preservation of the language and stories of the Eddic poems. By re-examining the arguably more "original" material from the *Poetic Edda*, it is possible to re-evaluate our view of Norse myth and gain increased insight into pagan beliefs.

The power of the revision of myth, specifically in literature, has largely been defined by feminist critics, and Diane Purkiss describes the rewriting of myth as denoting:

participation in [...] historical processes and the struggle to alter gender asymmetries agreed upon for centuries by myth's disseminators. [in Larrington 1991, 441]

Purkiss continues, describing how feminists can employ myth in the gender battle:

When feminists envisage that struggle, they often think of the rewriting or reinterpretation of individual stories: for example, by changing the focus of the narrative from a male character to a female character, or by shifting the terms of the myth so that what was a 'negative' female

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role-model becomes a positive one. [Larrington 1991, 441-42]

The inconsistency between Snorri's version of the story of Odin's acquisition of the mead of poetic inspiration and the poetic source in *Hávamál* led Icelandic author Svava Jakobsdóttir to dig beyond the standard version based on Snorri, and the result of her research was the novel *Gunnlaðar saga* (The Story about Gunnlod, 1987) which rewrites the myth, empowering the female figure of Gunnlod.

*Gunnlaðar saga* is composed on two time planes – the Danish Bronze Age and in modern Copenhagen – and is ostensibly the story of Dis, an Icelandic girl arrested in Denmark for stealing a priceless chalice. Although separate stories unfold on the two levels, the planes are interwoven through imagery, language, and allusions and through the character of Dis who relives Gunnlod's experiences. The imbalance created by Odin's betrayal in the past is paralleled to social and environmental crisis at the time of the Chernobyl accident, and as with Sørensen's *Ragnarok*, the image of nuclear catastrophe is linked to the mythical Ragnarok.

With the exception of Svava Jakobsdóttir, there are few examples of contemporary Scandinavian women writers using Norse myth to any great degree. One possible reason for this is that Norse myth does not contain a large number of suitably strong female role models. However, any literary interpretations of mythology must contain an element of revision. Alicia Ostriker has described how myth revision appropriates a "figure or tale [...] for altered ends" (in Showalter 1986, 316), and this does not limit the definition to feminist, or necessarily to politically correct, rewriting of mythology. In the years following the publication of Sørensen's *Ragnarok*, a number of other Scandinavian male writers have used myth revision as a vehicle for social comment.

Although stylistically the use of myth can influence an author's work quite dramatically, authors who use myth intertextually seem not to be turning to the myths for

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thematic inspiration, rather they tailor the mythological material to their own overriding preoccupations. Thus the theme of the perils of duality psychologically and politically, which is present throughout Villy Sørensen's authorship as a whole, is one of the main themes highlighted by the mythical conflict between the gods and the giants around which the plot of *Ragnarok* is centred. The use of myth in literature not only gives an added depth of texture to a work, but also lends credibility to the underlying themes and ideas in the author's work by lending it the weight of history.

*Misteltein*

The Norwegian writer Tor Obrestad (born 1938) can be seen to be drawing on this historicity and following in the footsteps of those writers who have previously combined political goals with literary re-use of mythology. Obrestad is primarily associated with the *Profil* literary group in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This group, which was connected to the Norwegian periodical of the same name, radicalized writing in Norway, initially advocating a move away from traditional realism towards European modernism and Nordic myth and folktale for inspiration. By 1968, however, the group of authors had more or less abandoned modernism in favour of using fiction as a vehicle for left-wing political ideas and social models, and it is for his writing from this period that Obrestad is best known.

His political agenda has always been openly expressed. In his selection of essays *Tenningar* (Ignitings) he writes:

"kunst" som ikkje impliserer og ikkje er skapt ut frå dagens problem er likegyldig fordi den formidlar falsk eller uinteressant informasjon og tilbyr ikkje innsikt om vår situasjon her og nå. [Obrestad 1982, 36]

["art" which does not implicate, and which is not created on the basis of today's problems is irrelevant because it

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conveys false or uninteresting information and offers no insight into our current situation.]

This political commitment comes through clearly in his poetry cycle *Misteltein* (Mistletoe, 1987). As a collection, *Misteltein* has a high content of political poems but the sixty-nine poems have a greater eloquence than Obrestad's prose writing of the 1970s and, by his use of mythology, he can be seen to combine his political ideals with a renewed interest in mythology.

Written in the minority Norwegian written language Nynorsk, *Misteltein* consists of poems written over at least a nine year period (the poem "Barnelærdom" (Elementary Knowledge, p. 67) is dated 1978). Despite this – and the diverse subject matter of the poems it contains – the collection has a cohesive quality which has much to do with its structure. The poems are divided into four sections, the first three of which have the separate voices of Balder, an unnamed poet and a factory worker called Schrøder respectively. The central importance of the mythological theme suggested by the title is indicated by the content of the first three poems in the first section, and this is returned to in the single poem in the final section – "Balders bålferd" (Balder's pyre, p. 89-90). The circularity produced by this framework, and the meeting of the three main characters in the third section, combined with the recurrence of images and motifs such as the sun, the snow and trees and foliage all contribute to the impression that the work is a "whole" – a cycle – rather than a disparate collection.

### *The Death of Balder*

The poems in Balder's voice in the first section of *Misteltein* are poems about the everyday life of a man; however, the mythical god Balder is best known for the circumstances surrounding his death.

The story of Balder's death is described in Snorri's *Edda* in *Gylfaginning* (The Deluding of Gylfi). Snorri tells how

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Balder the Good was plagued by nightmares suggesting his life was in danger, and to allay his fears Frigg, his mother, makes all things swear not to harm him, apart from the mistletoe which she considers too young. After this the Aser demonstrate that any missiles they throw at Balder do not harm him. The trickster character Loke goes to Frigg disguised as a woman and discovers that the mistletoe has not sworn the oath, and he picks it and gives it to Balder's brother, the blind god Hod, and assists him in aiming at Balder, who shoots and kills him. The Aser burn Balder in his boat at sea with his wife Nanna who has died of grief.

Hermod the Bold rides to Helheim to see if Hel, ruler of the realm of the dead, will accept a ransom to allow Balder back to Asgard. Hel agrees to release Balder if he is as widely loved as Hermod claims:

And if all things in the world, alive and dead, weep for him, then he shall go back to the Æsir, but be kept with Hel if any objects or refuses to weep [Faulkes 1987, 50]

Everything on Earth weeps except for a giantess called Tokki (Thanks), who is presumed to be Loke.

The death of Balder can be seen in the mythology to lead to the onset of Ragnarok – the downfall of the gods – both in Snorri's *Edda* and in the *Poetic Edda*: in *Voluspá* the verses which describe Balder's death (23-24) come shortly before the apocalyptic verses describing the collapse of social order before Ragnarok, and in *Baldurs draumar* (Balder's dreams) the witch consulted by Odin also connects the events to the downfall of the gods.

According to Saxo Grammaticus, Balder is not a god, but a human warrior defeated by Hoder who is his rival for Nanna's love, and in Obrestad's poems in the first section of *Misteltein* it is a very human version of Balder we meet.

### *The Life of Balder*

The section voiced by Balder is not political, and deals

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primarily with situations common to the lives of most people, demonstrating the simultaneous ordinariness and extraordinariness of human life. We follow, among other things, the course of Balder's love for his wife in a number of poems, his feelings at her giving birth, "Nå er du her, min mørke song" (You are now here, my dark song, p. 34), and accompany him on a walk in the Nordic summer, "Den hemmelege stranda i den nordiske sommaren" (The secret beach in the Nordic summer, p. 30-33).

However, among the descriptions of life is knowledge of death, and Balder's section also contains a poem marking the death of a friend, "Ei siste helsing frå deg til meg" (A final greeting from me to you, p. 42). The inevitability of death is alluded to in the first poem of the collection "Brått badar lyset over Balder" (The light bathes suddenly over Balder, p. 6) which has mythological references to Balder's death and subsequent burning made explicit in the final poem "Balders bålferd" (p. 89-90). The image of Loke sitting above in the poplar tree hints at Balder's fate:

Der, mellom greinene, sit Loke.  
I det fjerde tre frå venstre,  
der veks mistelteinen.  
Han skal hente pila  
her, i Frigg sin hage  
veks den nordlegaste misteltein  
i denne verda. Snart kverv han  
under granene innunder åsen,  
på veg til den blinde Hód.

[There, between the branches, sits Loke.  
In the fourth tree from the left,  
there the mistletoe grows.  
He is fetching the arrow  
here, in Frigg's garden  
grows the northernmost mistletoe  
in the world. Soon he disappears away  
beneath the spruce trees under the mountain,  
on his way to the blind Hód.]



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And there are also images of fire connected to the pyre in the final poem – the shining leaves in the foliage are described:

[...] Dei skal bli tente  
av sola sitt honninglys [...]

[... They will be lit  
by the honey-light of the sun ...]

In spite of these images of fire, and the reference to Balder's nightmares, "Drøymer vonde draumar midt på lyse dagen" (Dreaming dreadful dreams in the middle of the light day), and to Odin's knowledge of events, "Odin veit det" (Odin knows), the poem concludes on an almost euphoric note. Despite, and possibly because of, his knowledge of his own mortality, Balder is content to glory in the beauty of the spring day and seems elated in the second poem of the collection: "Den blinde truskulda er alltid utan angst" (The blind innocence is always free of fear, p. 7). Balder sees the innocent, but blind Hod being prepared by Loke to shoot; he laughingly cries out, not against the inherent injustice of the situation, but against the fact he still has so much to do:

[...] eg ler, ropar –  
Vent! Her er så vakkert!  
Så mykje ennå  
skulle ha vore gjort.

[... I laugh, shout –  
Wait! It is so beautiful here!  
There's so much left  
that should have been done.]

The sinister nature of the situation comes across not through Balder's account, but through the coldness and brevity of Loke's words:

Stram bogen, seier Loke.

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Slepp pila.

[Draw the bow, says Loke.  
Release the arrow.]

The third poem in the first section is spoken not through the words of Balder, but by the mistletoe of the title, and this breaks the pattern of each section having only one voice. In a riddle-like manner the plant describes its nature:

Det kom ein fugl med meg  
vengene var ikkje mine.  
Spira gjorde eg  
i det han la att etter seg.  
Voks gjorde eg  
gjennom andre sine røter.  
Eg står utanom,  
er meg sjølv, og er med.  
Poppelen slepper bladene  
og vintergreinene hylar.  
Eg står grøn mellom dei  
som ei sommarleg sky.  
Eg er organisert, lever og veks  
som kreft. Derfor  
kjenner eg kreften si gâte.

[A bird brought me  
the wings weren't mine.  
I shot up  
in what he left behind.  
I grew  
through the roots of others.  
I stand outside it all,  
am myself, and am a part of it.  
The poplar drops its leaves  
and the winter branches howl.  
I stand green between them  
like a summery cloud.  
I am organised, live and grow

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like cancer. Therefore  
I know cancer's riddle.]

This image of the parasite becomes particularly relevant in the poems in the subsequent sections where the theme of the exploitation of people is explored, and the mystical dual nature of the mistletoe also sheds light on the themes in the collection. There is a great sense of paradox in many of the poems, for instance that life, love and the world can be both good and bad, enjoyable and intolerable at one and the same time. This paradoxical nature of life is reflected in the mistletoe:

As neither tree nor shrub it symbolizes that which is neither one nor the other, which, by extension is the realm of freedom from limitation, so that anyone under the mistletoe is free from restrictions, but also free from protection, and re-enters the world of chaos. [Cooper 1978, 106]

Clearly connected to the symbolism of the mistletoe is the motif of the tree which is repeated in a number of poems throughout the collection. This is connected inevitably to the image of the world tree, the ash Yggdrasil, but also to the idea of people having roots, for example in the poem "Telemark" (p. 50):

Eg frys, er som eit gammalt tre  
Det har grodd fast  
Røtene kan ikkje flyttast på

[I freeze, am like an old tree  
It has grown solid  
Roots can not be budged]

The trees in the collection referred to by name are (like Yggdrasil) largely deciduous (poplars, cherry trees) and thus cyclical, and the frequent use of the foliage motif throughout emphasises this.

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Many of the poems in the first section contain elements of the duality of life. In the poem "Vi sat på kaféen" (We sat in the cafe, p. 11) love is seen to be accompanied by happiness and wonder for example:

Vi sat på kaféen  
 Du såg på meg  
 Eg strauk mi hand  
 over kinnet ditt  
 - Er du glad i meg?  
 - Eg er glad i deg  
 - Og eg i deg  
 Vi kysste kvarandre  
 Det var heilt banalt

Men det var eit under  
 Nå, etterpå  
 har eg tenkt -  
 Kven var det  
 som åpna for oss?  
 Og gjorde den  
 vennlege rørsle  
 med handa?

[We sat in the cafe  
 You looked at me  
 I stroke my hand  
 over your cheek  
 - Do you love me?  
 - I love you  
 - And me you  
 We kissed each other  
 It was totally banal

But it was a miracle  
 Now, afterwards  
 I have thought -  
 What was it  
 that opened up for us?

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And made that  
friendly movement  
of the hand?]

The poem can be read as implying that the love referred to may have died – "Nå, etterpå" (Now, afterwards) – and this sense of disappointment and resignation that can accompany love, and life, is clearer in "Veit ikkje om eg ga deg" (p. 33):

Veit ikkje om eg ga deg  
det du ville  
eg skulle gi, veit ikkje  
om eg ga deg roser  
Nå får du dette  
Her fins det ikkje løgn  
Ikkje bitterhet  
Her fins det  
som vi har gjort

[Don't know if I gave you  
what you wanted  
me to give, don't know  
if I gave you roses  
Now you get this  
Here are no lies  
No bitterness  
Here is what  
we have done]

Love can be seen to blossom and fade in a cycle, and this cyclic quality of life as a whole is reflected in the inner structure of the first section: the final poem in the section concerns a child leaving home, and this is referred to as "ein liten død" (a small death, p. 45), the reference to death creating a mini-cycle within the first section.

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*Poetic Vision*

The story of Balder is one of lack of vision: it is not just Hoder who is blind, but Frigg who is "blind" to the danger of mistletoe, which Obrestad describes as coming from "Frigg sin hage" (Frigg's garden) ("Brått badar lyset over Balder", p. 6). World problems can also be seen to be problems of lack of vision, and the metaphor of sight comes up regularly throughout the collection.

The poem "Den blinde truskulda er alltid utan angst" (p. 7) suggests not that blindness/ignorance is bliss, but that it is inherently dangerous. The poem "Eg har eit varmt auga" (I have one warm eye, p. 13) alludes to Odin's blind (cold) eye through the loss of which he gained insight, and connects the image of sight to perception; the (passionate) warm eye sees surface finery, and the cold (dispassionate) eye sees beyond the superficial:

Eg har eit varmt auga  
og eit kaldt  
Skal eg sjå på deg med det varme?  
Sjå stasen din og det raude blod?

Skal eg sjå på deg med det kalde?  
Det som ser tvers gjennom  
lakk, fakter, fjas  
Heilt inn. Der lyser  
beingrinda

Du skal vite:  
Eg går gjennom verda  
med åpne augo

[I have one warm eye  
and one cold  
Should I look at you with the warm eye?  
See your finery and red blood?

Should I look at you with the cold eye?

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Which looks straight through  
 veneer, gestures, frivolity  
 Right inside. There glows  
 the skeleton

You should know:  
 I go through the world  
 with open eyes]

The theme of vision also appears in the cycle's second section, notably in the poem "Sommarhelsing" (Summer greeting, p. 52). As well as extending the idea of circularity through emphasizing the opposing seasons, this poem is also about vision: the "poet", through whose words this section is voiced, clears his vision through his cleaning of the window and sets himself down at his typewriter to look out, and presumably to convey his view to others:

I natt har eg sove godt, Olav  
 Kjende at eg nok kunne skriva eit dikt  
 Og eg sette meg ned  
 kikka ut vindauga  
 Det var støv og skit  
 Ubrukeleg, såg ikkje klart  
 Derfor fylte eg bøtta med lunka såpevatn  
 tok gummi-hanskane og ein nal  
 ei side med Aftenpostens annonser  
 Det er midt i januar. Ei grad mildt  
 Nå er det blitt så lyst  
 at eg kan slukke lampene  
 Sette meg til maskinen  
 for å sjå ut

[Last night I slept well, Olav  
 Felt that I could probably write a poem  
 And I sat myself down  
 Looked out of the window  
 There was dust and dirt  
 Useless, couldn't see clearly



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Therefore I filled a bucket with lukewarm soapy water  
 got the rubber gloves and a rag  
 a page of adverts from The Evening Post  
 It is the middle of January. One degree above  
 Now it has got so light  
 that I can turn off the lamp  
 Sit myself at the machine  
 to look out]

The implication in the poem is that he looks out at the world, not through the window, but through the machine at which he is working. By using the word "maskin" (machine) to describe his typewriter rather than the more normal "skrivemaskin" (typewriter – literally: "writing machine") Obrestad draws a parallel between the writer and the worker, and this ties in with his openly political agenda for his writing.

*Misteltein's* second section contains a number of poems about international politics and the people affected by political events around the world. From his "machine" the poet gives us his insight into events not just in Norway but in places such as Macedonia in "For ein Makedonsk Venn" (To a Macedonian friend, p. 55-56), Ireland in "Slaktarane møter Bobby Sands" (The butchers meet Bobby Sands, p. 59-61), and Poland in "Det Polske Flagg" (The Polish flag, p. 57).

One of Obrestad's main criticisms is aimed at the lack of action against injustice in the world. The second section as a whole begins with a poem entitled "Fragment av ein syklus" (Fragment of a cycle, p. 47) which is critical of those who fail to take responsibility into their own hands:

Eg vil ikkje  
 vil ikkje  
 ta ansvar  
 har ikkje tid  
 ikkje råd  
 vil ikkje  
 tenke på det

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I lengre tid  
 har eg vakna  
 klokka tre  
 om morgonen  
 og ikkje gjort anna  
 enn å tenke

[I will not  
 will not  
 take responsibility  
 don't have time  
 don't have the money  
 will not  
 think about it

For a long time  
 I have woken  
 three o'clock  
 in the morning  
 and done nothing  
 but think]

International problems – wars and injustice – are more distant in this third section, although their presence is felt from the very first poem "Schrøder", when the news breaks the idyll of the summer day. The injustice touched upon in Schrøder's section is mainly injustice within Norway. Although Norway is hailed as "Det rikaste landet i verden" (The richest country in the world, p. 68) it becomes apparent through the poems that Obrestad does not consider that everyone gets an equal share of the wealth, or luxury: "Kven sier at slitets tidsalder er over" (Who says the time of hard labour has passed, "Barnelærdom", p. 67), although the inequality is shown to be greater on an international scale ("Lønn", Wages, p. 65).

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*Fate and Freedom*

The opening poem in the third section, "Schrøder" (p. 63), is linked linguistically and thematically to the first poem in the Balder section through the factory worker, Schrøder, being pictured standing in a cherry tree, and through the images of fire:

Det er den siste julidagen, sola gneistrar  
 på det blanke morellskalet  
 og tenner tusen soler kring meg der eg står.

[It is the last day of July, the sun sparkles  
 on the shining cherry skin  
 and lights a thousand suns around me where I stand]

In sharp contrast to this idyllic summer scene comes the news on the radio of bombing in Beirut. The lines "endå ingen kastar anna enn sol over oss, her, / i det grøne Norden" (even though no-one is throwing anything other than sun over us, here/in the green North) allude to the throwing of missiles at the mythical Balder, and also, by the juxtaposition of Scandinavia and unrest, implies that unrest could take place in Norway. Additional discord comes from the introduction of the fact that Schrøder's personal fortunes are in the hands of "Akkordstyret" (The Management) who "sopar saman restane / av den store treforedlingsfabrikken eg jobba på" (brush together the remains / of the big wood processing factory I worked at).

In the same way as Balder, Schrøder seems to feel a sense of elation from danger; it is unclear whether the branch will hold or not, but at the same time it gives a sense that he is reaching out for something better:

Eg strekker meg/på tåpissane etter sola" [p. 69]  
 [I reach up/on the tips of my toes towards the sun].

The feeling of elation combined with uncertainty emerges once again when he is unsure whether he can make it back to

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shore when he is swimming in the sea "Til venstre ser eg fyrlykta på Østnestangen" (On the left I can see the light-house on Østnestangen, p. 82).

Throughout the Schrøder section, the personal is political: being laid off from the factory can be seen to lead to financial and marital problems ("Status", Status, p. 68), but is also equated with a kind of freedom as described in "Fri" (Free, p. 69):

Eg er fri  
 på den måten ein har fri  
 når fabrikkjen står.  
 "Det varer iallfall 14 dagar  
 til å begynne med"  
 Vi traskar ned gjennom orekrattet  
 poeten og eg, vi har sorger  
 som skal leggest i bløyt  
 Suter som eit sett skitne arbeidsbukser  
 Bløytevatnet har eg på lomma  
 Gløymseleugen mellom askene –  
 – Kor er dama? spurde han  
 – eg såg bilen då eg la meg.  
 – Veit ikkje, svarar eg, – hon tok barna  
 i bilen og drog. Slik er det nå  
 Uråd å få til noko  
 Uråd å få sammanheng i noko  
 Uråd å vite nokonting om framtida  
 – Det er eit fritt land, sa han  
 Så tok vi oss ein klunk og lo

[I am free  
 to the extent one is free  
 when the factory is shut.  
 "It will last, in any case, 14 days  
 to begin with"  
 We tramp down through the alder thicket  
 the poet and I, we have sorrows  
 which need to be left to soak  
 Anxieties like a pair of dirty work trousers

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I have the soaking-water in my pocket  
 The Road to Forgetting through the ashes –  
 – Where's the wife? he asks  
 – I saw the car when I went to bed.  
 – I don't know, I answer, – she took the children  
 in the car and went. That's how it is now  
 Impossible to do anything  
 Impossible to make anything make sense  
 Impossible to know anything about the future  
 – It's a free country, he said  
 So we took a swig and laughed]

Alongside the theme of social inequity and injustice, the collection also contains the theme of man in nature and at the whim of nature, or fate. In a way the power of nature can be seen to be greater than the power of man.

The element of water is very important in connection with the character of Schröder, and several of the poems in his section describe him swimming in the ocean. When in the water he experiences a releasing sense of indifference: "Ei underleg likesæle i vatnet" (A strange indifference in the water, p. 79), and when he is thrashing about in the metre-high waves he feels free: "sanneleg er eg fri" (truly I am free (in "Energien har slått ein sirkel kring kroppen", The energy has drawn a circle around my body, p. 84). The indifference he experiences is only lifted by the thought of his children: "Eit einaste spørsmål held me flytande: / Kor skal vel barna mine ta vegen?" (A single question keeps me afloat: / How will my children get along? p. 81).

The connection to swimming and water can be seen to be a metaphor for Schröder's life and this becomes apparent in the poem "Eg sym gjennom livet med åpne spørsmål" (I swim through life with open questions, p. 86). "Tenkte aldri på havet" (I never thought about the ocean, p. 87) continues this metaphor:

Tenkte aldri på havet  
 Tenkte alltid havet  
 er der

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like bortanfor horisonten

[I never thought about the ocean  
Just thought the ocean  
is there  
just beyond the horizon]

implying that the lack of reflection – along with a feeling that there is something beyond his experience – applies equally to the way Schröder has gone through life.

The freedom, and external control, Schröder experiences out in the open sea is present in his life as a whole. He is subject to chance and market forces over which he has as little control as an individual as his forebears had over the force of fate. The element of chance is emphasized in two poems, "Eg svingde av den bare hovudvegen" (I turned off the bare main road, p. 70) and "Døden er ein tømmertrailer ned bakken" (Death is a timber truck down a bank, p. 71) the first of which describes a close escape from death:

[...] – det skal ein liten sving  
bort frå situasjonen du kontrollerer  
til situasjonen der du er kontrollert,  
ein svings sekund  
frå du tronar i beltet,  
konge over vegen og dine ni liv,  
til vala dine er umogelege.  
Og så den svingen  
som ikkje var nødvendig, ein feil,

[... – it just takes a small turn  
away from a situation you can control  
to a situation where you are controlled,  
the second of one turn  
from lording over it in the seat-belt,  
king of the road and your nine lives,  
until your choices are impossible.  
And then that turn  
which was not necessary, a mistake,]

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and the second which describes a fatal accident in which the tragedy was not avoided:

Døden er ein tømmertrailer ned bakken  
i ukontrollert fart.  
Sjåføren skal klare akkorden.  
Det han trur han styrer  
styrer han. [p. 71]

[Death is a timber truck down the bank  
at uncontrollable speed.  
The driver has to complete his quota.  
The thing he thinks he's steering  
is steering him.]

However, while chance can be seen to play a part in whether one lives or dies, it is human error that is the crucial element.

The idea that it is a fallacy to imply that one's fate depends on chance reappears in "For det er som på en fest" (Because it is like at a party, p. 51) which describes "det" (it) – presumably life – as being:

[...] som eit spel poker  
Vi byr opp: fritid og pengar  
arbeidet, tilliten på jobben  
ekteskapet, stoltheten, barna  
si framtid, og vi skal til å satse meir –  
Då veltar han bordet og ropar  
Spelet er regissert  
frå ende til annan?

[... like a game of poker  
We bid: time off and money  
work, confidence at work,  
our marriage, pride, the children's  
future, and we want to bet more –  
Then he tips over the table and shouts  
The game is fixed  
from one end to the other?]



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This notion that the fate of the individual, and society, is neither dependent on chance, or self-determined can also be connected to Norse mythology; however, Obrestad portrays the determining factor not as the Norns – the goddesses of fate – but as market forces over which the individual has no control.

Alongside allusion to mythology through the work's overall structure, mythological imagery, and through linking chance to the mythical notion of fate, the continued significance of myth/mythical patterns on society is suggested by the clear reference to folk customs that remain to this day, in the final poem "Balders bálferd" (p. 89-90). This poem connects the myth of the burning of Balder with the folk traditions surrounding the summer solstice and the burning of bonfires at mid-summer parties. These festivities are based on the tradition that this was the anniversary of Balder's death, and of his descent into Hel, and their continuation indicates how deep seated the Norse mythological tradition remains in the Nordic psyche – consciously or unconsciously.

This underlying presence of Norse traditions within Norwegian culture, and their role in the creation of Norway as a nation state, gives Obrestad's use of Norse mythology in his social critique a powerful impact: his directly political message in *Misteltein* is backed up by the deepest roots of the culture.

*Note*

The translations of Obrestad's poems are my own.

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